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CONTRIBUTORS

SAM BLEUFARB was born in London, came to America at twelve, served in the merchant marine before the war and in the army from 1941 to 1945. He teaches English in the Los Angeles harbor area.

SUE ABBOTT BOYD, of Fort Smith, Ark., attended the New School for Social Research after army service. She is a contributor to *Four Quarters, Nimrod, Audience, San Francisco Review,* etc.

RICHARD EMIL BRAUN, a fellow in classical studies at Michigan, is a frequent contributor to the quarterly.

GUIDO GEZELLE (1830-1899) was a Flemish poet-priest whom, we hope, Oscar Mandel's present article and translations will bring to wider attention in America.

OSCAR MANDEL, born in Belgium, was educated in American universities and teaches English at Nebraska. He has published verse and criticism in *American Scholar, Epoch, Prairie Schooner,* etc.

JACK MATTHEWS' fiction has been in *Chicago Review, Quixote, Southwest Review,* etc. He works for the Columbus *Dispatch.*

SAMUEL FRENCH MORSE, of the English faculty at Trinity College (Hartford), is the author of two volumes of poetry and the editor of Wallace Stevens' *Opus Posthumous.* He is working on a critical biography of Stevens.

RALPH J. MILLS, JR., will join the faculty of the University of Chicago next fall. His most recent essays were on Stevens (in ACCENT) and Roethke (in *Tri-Quarterly*).

ANNE SEXTON lives in Newton Lower Falls, Mass. Her poetry has appeared in *Western Review, Antioch Review, Beloit Poetry Journal,* etc.

R. G. VLIET, a previous contributor, lives in Meadville, Pa.

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ACCENT
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OSCAR MANDEL:

A Flemish Innocent: Guido Gezelle*

Als de ziele luistert . . .

It is no easy task at any time to interest the readers of a major language in the poetry of a minor language; and it is a task even less easy at this particular time if that poetry is both simple and romantic. Yet until 1899 there lived in a quiet corner of northwestern Belgium a poet who wrote simply and romantically in a minor dialect of a minor language, and who nevertheless is well worth our acquaintance. His very name, Guido Gezelle, is all but unknown to the literate English and American public, though he is applauded in his own country and in the Netherlands as a lyric master who does not yield to Heine (in the latter's simpler accents) or to Verlaine.

There is a certain value in merely knowing of the existence of important authors in "lesser" nations, in acquiring a few facts to classify them, and perhaps in speculating about the fame which might have accrued to them had they been businesslike enough to use a more popu-

* The term "Flemish" is applied to the varieties of Dutch spoken in Belgium. Flemish differs from Dutch roughly as American differs from British; but it is subdivided into dialects far more pronounced than any which occur in the United States.

lar language. But my chief purpose in these pages is to present Gezelle as a practitioner of a type of art which has not received much attention from our critics—what I will call the *art of innocence.* Innocence in art —we will examine the term more closely by-and-by—is commonly thought to be a characteristic of folk efforts. We know, however, that folk art is often complex and highly strained. On the other hand, the art of sane children and of civilized "primitives" is certainly innocent. But theirs is the innocence of what Pascal, in one of his *Pensées,* calls *"l'ignorance naturelle,"* and its quality is not the same as that of the *"ignorance savante qui se connait,"* which comes late in life to a few very wise people, and which has expressed itself (*pace* the critics who thirst for irony and ambiguity) in some of the most moving works of art we possess. Now in the sophisticated artlessness of Gezelle we can study the innocent state of mind in one of its purest manifestations.

Guido Gezelle was born in Brugge (Bruges) in 1830, the year in which Belgium began life as an independent nation. He lived his whole span in a single Flemish province, that of West Flanders. It must be recalled that Belgium had been ruined by the Peace of Utrecht (1648) and that two centuries of foreign domination and economic stagnation had virtually taken it out of history, except as a convenient battlefield. The northern, Flemish part of Belgium had become, under the Spanish occupation, narrowly and unanimously Roman Catholic. Stagnation did not, therefore, strike the Flemings as necessarily an evil. Cut off from whatever vitality remained to the Dutch in the eighteenth century, they lay down, as it were, as one of the most backward populations of Europe, isolated, passive, poor, conservative, and unresponsive to new or exotic ideas. Liberation did not help much at first. The Flemings were now reduced to second-rank citizenship by the French-speaking elite, and thus continued in their role of rural, pro-clerical conservatives. To this day, in spite of the rush of tourism, the visitor of Brugge senses how time stood still in Flanders, and how, with an astonishing doggedness, provincial life went on without regard for the intellectual or social tempests of Paris or London. Nevertheless, the nineteenth century saw the rebirth, and in part the success, of a Flemish nationalism which wrested important political and legal concessions from the government, looking forward to the official equality which obtains today. At the same time, intellectual nationalism asserted the dignity of the Flemish language, and returned with pride to the medieval glories of Flanders. In doing so, it created its own literature, distinct from that of the Dutch. We have here, of course,

well-known ingredients of Romanticism, a movement which reached Flanders belatedly, when French poets were turning to aestheticism and decadence.

Gezelle is best realized against this backdrop: the stolid, entirely Spanish orthodoxy of the northern people and clergy, a rural economy, distance from the intellectual cruxes of the period, the renascence of Flemish culture, and the assertion of Flemish rights.

His father, a humble gardener, dedicated him early to the Church; and it was as an obedient, unquestioning, active and wholly devoted priest that Gezelle spent his life. He suffered from intrigues and fought his battles, but, like the actors in *Barchester Towers,* he fought them within the Church. Ordained in 1854 after some years as a scholarship student in Brugge and Roeselare (Roulers), he became an instructor, and quickly earned the love of his seminarists and the distrust of his superiors by his unconventional ardor. He was, in fact, a "progressive" educator before his time by instinct, in the sense that he oversaw the development of children's souls rather than the repetition of their lessons. But his tender indulgence and his unorthodox lessons upset the discipline of the seminary and threatened to dishevel the neat curriculum. When he was removed from his post in 1859 and benevolently but firmly transferred to a minor office in Brugge, he suffered a shock which silenced him for nearly twenty years. These were, however, years of great activity—earnest dedication to the modest duties which were his in various seminaries, vicarages, and convents; foundation of a journal; and, most important, philological studies during which he collected, like so many priceless gems, thousands of words and idioms of the West Flanders dialect. These studies were, for him, an act of national piety, not academic exercise. He kept on one side of political agitation (though he wrote a number of patriotic poems), and made the exaltation of a language his contribution to the Flemish cause. When he broke his silence at last, it was as a supreme lyrist in the dialect. In his last years he acquired a measure of fame, disciples, a few honors, and sinecures; and he died in 1899 neither unknown nor unappreciated.

As a dialect poet, Gezelle invites comparison with Burns. Like Burns, he comes in modern editions supplied with profuse glossaries. And, like Burns, he speaks in accents which are unavailable to the dignified mother-tongue. Gezelle scorned the stiff and lofty Dutch in which his Parnassian contemporaries wrote, almost as much as he detested Gallic infusions into the language; and, like a true Romantic,

he looked for his poetic diction to the speech of humble folk. This had been Wordsworth's program, and that of Herder and Goethe before; but Wordsworth for one had never lost the consciousness of his dignity. His attitude toward the cottagers, in fact, was closer to what Boswell and Johnson's attitude toward the Scottish crofters had been than is usually supposed. He wrote of the humble, but he did not write humbly. It is in Burns that we hear the genuine folk-note—poetry written from within the locality, poetry which does not stoop, as that of Wordsworth often does, with a touch of gentlemanly condescension, because it is itself lowly.

But this lowliness is not only a state of mind, or an accident of birth: it exists or does not exist in the language itself. The central languages tend to be formal, dignified, and organized, or rather subdued, by grammar after their exuberant youths. As a result, poets who write in these languages experience great difficulty when they try to write intimately. For intimate poetry, we must visit the dialects of Ireland or Scotland (can English translate "wee" and "bonnie" without silliness?), we must listen to Yiddish, or to Negro spirituals, or, like Gezelle, study a Flemish dialect. These dialects yield a peculiar poetry: above all *homely;* tender and affectionate (dialects are rich in diminutives); honest, direct, and naive; colorful; —poetry which eats with its fingers without meaning harm; which can speak of babies (bairns) and mothers (moederkes) without sentimentality; zestful because of its freedom from the academy; altogether at ease and snug.

All these are qualities of Gezelle's poetry, which his Parnassian contemporaries at first dismissed for its "street-lingo." Needless to say, it owes something to the German Romantic lyric, as well as to the English, which Gezelle knew perfectly. Yet it is absolutely native withal. To find similar accents in English poetry, we must return to the Middle Ages, or search for an occasional note in George Herbert, Blake or Emily Dickinson.

An analogy between Gezelle and Burns stops short at the effects inherent in the use of dialect. For Gezelle lives in another world. It must be admitted that, next to Burns', this world seems a little pale. Gezelle is not robust; he is what the French call *farouche:* he does not like the market-place; people frighten him. He writes sentimental epistles to a few male friends or pupils, like a bashful maiden, but for the rest his poetry shuns the human race. His most famous rejection occurs in a poem entitled "The Snail" *("De Slekke"),*

in which he represents himself as the snail which has crept out of its house by mistake, and, with one look at the world, where "every dog envies the other's bread," hastily withdraws again, promising not to open the door to anyone, no matter how loud the knock. And elsewhere, again, Gezelle consciously sets himself his task as an unsociable poet:

Let them keep their song
bearing the heavy weight
of every bitter little wrong
by which they call Man great.
I sing God's works, His name
comes back like an undying chord;
oh poets, I feel it is no shame
if I am seen before the Lord.

"I sing God's works." He forgets for the nonce that man is a work of God. He thinks only of nature. God, then, and nature; but also God in nature, or rather God by way of nature, for Gezelle is no pantheist.

Under the subject God and Christ, we discover a flood of poetry, much of it worthless, concerning feast days, the liturgy, the sacraments, and containing the pious ejaculations of a priestly soul. The poetry of Keble gives the measure of this portion of Gezelle's works, except where the latter's genius suddenly bathes a poem in the most brilliant light, and then he is with Herbert rather than with Keble. Much of this verse is occasional, for Gezelle conscientiously versified for his parishioners, and turned many a baptism or a funeral into suitable doggerel. But even at its best, we must not expect in this poetry any of the turmoil which afflicted the great English priest-poets—Donne, Herbert, and Hopkins. He is often melancholy; he reproaches himself and the world; but he is not lacerated; he has no ultimate terrors. Above all, he has no doubts: if he has an unconscious in this respect, it appears to be in harmony with the surface of his mind. The often-made comparison with St. Francis is apt, for his soul is child-like. Though he accuses himself of insufficient zeal, he is never far from serenity. His poems end uniformly in the major key, resolved, and his surrender to God, to Jesus, and to the Church is as absolute as the child's to its mother:

Would you be free
in the humblest cot?
Fly the world,
seek God!

But, more important, he sings God's works; and here lies his true genius. His landscape is not the dangerous nature of Byron, the inebriating nature of Keats, and least of all the agonizing nature of Hardy. As may be expected, it comes closest to Wordsworth's (among the English)—a Wordsworth without mountains, however, and with a finer eye for the pretty detail. One needs an acquaintance with Flanders—or with the Dutch painters—to feel the truth of that mildness (barring an occasional storm, loud but not catastrophic) which Gezelle renders. He loves nature in the Franciscan way—like a child, using soft diminutives, examining it with tender supervision, and with perfect intimacy. His objects are all every-day: clouds, rain, mist, trees, grass, birds, cows, horses, buds, flowers, and especially streams and the sun. A critic eager to assimilate Gezelle to "modern tendencies" could complicate this mildest of poets by showing that he treats nature on three levels: as literal scene, as psychological symbol, and as theological symbol; that is to say, he may express a perfectly simple landscape; he may indulge in the pathetic fallacy to express his own mood; or he may mean God when he says the Sun. But these processes are so simple, and his symbolism so obvious, that we had better leave him in peace, lest our mountain labor to bring forth a mouse. Gezelle's talent, whatever it is, does not lie in intellectual complexity.

To approach Gezelle, in short, we must simplify ourselves. We must be prepared to accept "naive" poetry—poetry without conflict, opposed by no obstacles; in short, poetry devoid of the ironies which Mr. Warren called for in his essay on "Pure and Impure Poetry." But let us not confuse naive poetry with the poetry of naive people. The person who composed the Nineteenth Psalm—"The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handiwork"—fashioned naive poetry, but he was obviously no simpleton. True naive poetry is that which is written, not *without* conflict, but *after* conflict, and even *above* conflict. Its truth is simply that the writer seems justified in his feelings or his thoughts; or rather, to phrase this precisely, that he succeeds in justifying them in our eyes. A simple adoration of a tree can be expressed by a naive poetaster, or it can be the naive expression of a genius—and then we call it sublime. In naive poetry, the poet validates, by his mastery of form and diction, and by intellectual decorum (which consists as much in expunging the bathetic and the sentimental as in adducing the

exact and the noble) a concept which the poetaster corrupts by commonplace, foolish or mendacious associations. Now Gezelle is by no means uniformly successful as a naive poet. He regresses all too often to the infantile. He lacks the firmness of a great intellect; he melts too easily; he does not have a shield of hard ideas to guard him against emotion. But in his fine moments—and they are many—his voice rings as true as, say, that of Heinrich Schütz in the *Weinachthistorie,* or that of Blake in

> "Pipe a song about a Lamb!"
> So I piped with merry cheer.
> "Piper, pipe that song again";
> So I piped: he wept to hear.

Unlike Tennyson's "Song of the Brook," which is only clever description (though close to Gezelle in manner), Gezelle's poetry achieves intellectual decorum by a simple yet entirely convincing and affecting piety which, by making nature the creature of God, validates his ecstasy.

Gezelle's place, then, is among the world's artists of innocence. The art of innocence, whether it comes as music, as painting, or as poetry, has a long and honorable history, honorable because it expresses one of the modes of intelligent cognition. Rather than define the term, or distinguish between secular and religious innocence, we may name a few works at random which seem to belong to this class, at least in part: the romance of *Daphnis and Chloe* (particularly in its sixteenth-century French translation by Amyot), *Aucassin et Nicolette,* the *Fioretti* of St. Francis, the paintings of Fra Angelico, certain madrigals of Monteverdi's (e.g. *Chiome d'Oro*), Schütz' oratorio already mentioned, Buxtehude's *In Dulci Jubilo,* Bach's *Sheep May Safely Graze,* the trios of Ladies and Boys in the *Magic Flute,* and a number of Blake's *Songs.* All these—and, of course, many others—concern the discovery of innocence; not the longing, not the achieving, but the possession.* Innocent art concerns man returned to Paradise, whether this Paradise be in nature and secular, or out of time under God. Its validity as one of the modes of apprehension and desire cannot be questioned. Just as man portrays the militant triumph of his ideal in a *Republic* or in an *Iliad*—ideal society, ideal man; just as he extracts from misery true courage, honesty, compassion, and expresses, in his

* Gezelle has many poems in which he expresses the *longing* for purity; but these are no more his pure poems than Donne's "Batter my heart" is pure in our sense of the word.

art and his thought, the *if only* which bemuses every soul after its own fashion; so the artist may now and again open before our eyes the state rather than the process of triumph—obstacles out of sight, a world without *no*. To accuse him of disbelieving in evil is to accuse him of idiocy, and of this the mastery of his craft, if nothing else, disculpates him. If we accept the list I have suggested, we notice that this art is often extremely sophisticated, and that, as often as not, it represents the late work of cunning masters. What this art does is to satisfy our craving for rest. Perpetually at war, always removing or being removed, in frequent anguish while we travel to our own version of Paradise—a version which, we sometimes discover with consternation, we have not even formulated to ourselves with any clarity—we demand on occasion the ecstatic repose of innocence, the lying down of the lamb with the tiger. This is not escape, but rather the imaginative relish of a perfection which we know we are never to hold. To remain permanently in this visionary state is clearly and technically lunacy. But to yield occasionally to the art of innocence is to quench an elemental thirst of our natures—Paradise, if you wish, is an archetype. We were children once, and in our most earnest search for "fulfillment" or "happiness," we are but longing to return, though this time in full consciousness, to the bliss of simplicity;

> And I have asked to be
> Where no storms come,
> Where the green swell is in the haven dumb,
> And out of the swing of the sea.

The poignancy of innocent art (for there is no art more poignant) derives from our awareness that only art can give us Paradise; that the experience of Paradise must be forever vicarious. That is why, when Mozart is at his happiest, we weep.

Innocent art cannot be too carefully detached from sentimental art. Both idealize by avoiding difficulties, but the first removes itself candidly to its version of Paradise (Fra Angelico does so literally), whereas the latter remains on earth. The premise of sentimental art is the same as that of realistic art: it busies itself with the supposedly "true world"—with our recognizable neighborhood. By idealizing within the realistic premise (the happy family, the poor but honest folk, the faithful dog, etc.), this art sets out to deceive us as to the typical reality of the world. The common expression, "seeing the world through rose-colored glasses," describes this imposition quite

well. But innocent art does not pretend to see "the world." It shifts its premises (in both meanings of the word), and removes itself to a place either frankly imagined or frankly purged.

But to *express* innocence acceptably, to involve the jaded and skeptical reader in it, is the craftsman's task. Indeed, the simpler the conceptual materials, the more exacting their demands on the artist, who at this work may be renamed without derogation artificer or artisan. The very simplicity of thought in the lyric poem mercilessly exposes the craftsman's shortcomings. He is almost in the position of the Chinese or Japanese landscape artists, who, given a few subjects which generations of painters had handled before them, found their task all the harder for that very reason. Now Gezelle is probably the very last of the European Romantic poets. He has nothing startling to say. His success depends therefore on a new quality in handling the brush—a shadow never before seen, a way of bending over a flower, a curious accent. Gezelle, it turns out, though the last of a line, writes like a discoverer.

As far as verse form is concerned, he is as abundant as Herbert. He is an inexhaustible and an inexhaustibly bold metrical inventor. It is as though the variety he observed in nature had forced his ear to devise an equivalent variety of forms. At the same time, he is the first European poet to discard punctuation for the sake of swiftness and breathlessness. But his highest mastery lies in music. He has often been credited with practicing *"de la musique avant toute chose"* before Verlaine. But his music does not have Verlaine's cry of pain. It tends to be soft and fresh, and, thanks to his remarkable use of dialect, it is often slyly humorous as well. Whatever his mood, however, the music is channeled by the metrical forms, complicated by "tricks" of diction (such as repetitions, inversions, etc.), and controlled by the theme in hand. It is, as lyric poetry should be, spontaneous in its effect, and calculated in its origin. Tennyson's "Song of the Brook" gives some idea of Gezelle's quality—

> I slip, I slide, I gloom, I glance,
> Among my skimming swallows;
> I make the nettled sunbeams dance
> Against my sandy shallows—

but in Gezelle the Franciscan ecstasy transfigures the poetry, while its dialect humility penetrates to the heart as Tennyson's measured English cannot do. The following is a stanza from one of the many poems about water, this one dated 1860:

Het water dat in the beke vliet
en henenschiet
zoo zachtjes
met lachtjes
en klachtjes
het water is zulk een wonder ding
het zingt het klinkt het blinkt

The effects of music and the rapidity of the verse can be noticed even without a knowledge of Flemish. Here, however, is the flat literal translation: "The water that flows in the brook / and shoots off / so softly / with little laughs / and little moans / the water is so marvelous a thing / it sings it rings it glitters." Going back to the original, we observe first that "lachtjes" is dialect for "lachjes"—"little laughs" or "smiles"—and "klinkt" is taken in its dialect meaning of "rings" rather than its formal meaning "sounds." But the dialect influence in the poems of that period is as yet a minor one. What arrests our attention is the cascading of lines 3 to 5 following the water's "shooting off," and of course the triple rhyme which imitates what is after all the rhyming sound of rippling water. The triple rhyme is flattened out (as though the water were momentarily resting in a shallow) in the last line, where it also becomes distinctly onomatopoeic. If line 6 seems flabby in the translation, Gezelle saves it by his use of "wonder," which is a noun, in an adjectival position. Of the same line, it may be observed that it runs the gamut of vowels: the neutral *e* of "het"; the *a* (pronounced in the German or French manner) of "water"; the *u (ü)* of "zulk"; the long *ee* (as in "say") of "een"; the open *o* of "wonder"; and the short *i* of "ding." Finally, the suffix of lines 3 to 5 is the diminutive, and here the English translator must despair. One syllable renders the brook's dimension, its modest importance, and the poet's affection for it.

As this particular poem was not published during the poet's lifetime, it may be unfair to take it to task for any weaknesses. Yet the bathos of its final line is so typical of Gezelle's lapses that it is useful to quote it:

dat water is zulk een wonder ding
een wonder ding
bezonderlijk als me't drinkt—

"water is so marvelous a thing particularly when you drink it."

The danger for Gezelle was that because of the extreme simplicity of his matter, he stood always on the verge of simple-mindedness; and

not only stood near it, but, lacking the gift of supreme intellectual balance, often fell into it. Even some of his finest poems are weakened by flaccid and inorganic lines, sentimental touches, or idle repetitions; and altogether he is too facile and too prolific. On the other hand, the accusation that the intellectual movements of his day passed him by is uncalled for. The fact, as such, is undeniable. The world of his poetry knows no Darwinism, "higher criticism," French or Industrial Revolution, colonies, social unrest, or even Protestantism. In fact, as we have already remarked, it is all but empty of men, and women do not exist for it. But all this does not constitute an accusation. Who looks for the Persian Empire in Sappho? Gezelle fails only when he sings his own tunes false. If his interests are few, they have the advantage of being perennial. I have already suggested that the very simplicity of his thought gives him scope as an artist. His craftsmanship, far from making his devotion to God artificial, actually becomes his devotion. He sends his poems to God as his offerings on the altar, and shapes them as an act of piety to a perfection which will equal the natural perfection of honey, web, or star. In one of his most anthologized lyrics he says that all nature speaks and interprets the word of God—when the soul is listening, *als de ziele luistert.* Gezelle was a listener who, like a bird in conversation with another, sang back.

Bibliographical note

A handful of Gezelle's poems have been translated (without success) into English. They can be found in J. Greshoff, *Harvest of the Lowlands* (New York, 1945); in A. J. Barnouw, *Coming After* (Rutgers University Press, 1948); and in *Lyra Belgica,* a booklet issued by the Belgian Government Information Center (New York, 1950). A few prose translations occur in the only book about Gezelle written in English to my knowledge: G. L. van Roosbroek, *Guido Gezelle, the Mystic Poet of Flanders* (Vinton, Iowa, 1919). The World Literature handbooks have articles on Gezelle, and the *Encyclopedia Britannica* gives him a paragraph. All other materials are in Dutch, French, or German.

For the translations below I have used the four-volume *Werken* of Gezelle published, without date, by L. J. Veen in Amsterdam, under the editorship of Fr. Baur.

The translations are not always literal, but then the matter of Gezelle is such that a change for the sake of music or mood, provided it does not harm the essential thought, ought to be made without hesitation. There are poets whose thought must be rendered almost word by word, but the translator of Gezelle must strive to create an equivalent spirit. I need not add that what follows is meant only to point out the direction in which that spirit hovers, and not to exhibit it captured. The innocence I have spoken of does not, I fear, transpire more than once or twice in these translations.

The pretty bee makes honey

(Het bietje maakt den heuning en)

The pretty bee makes honey,
the spider tends her loom;
a star is busy shining,
a flower blows perfume;
the sun sends out his stoutest light,
the moon her finest dart;
and I, my Lord and God, I send
oh singing and my heart.

(from *Driemaal XXXIII Kleengedichtjes,* 1860)

Easter, Easter

(Paaschen, Paaschen)

Easter, Easter
lark and finch
strike up
and sing,
sing the voice
of man and beast!
Easter, Easter
offer feast
of flame and
consecrated lamp;
fresh incense,
rise and smoke:
Hallelujah,
down the doom
and down the yoke
of the tomb!

Easter, Easter,
the God
stands up, whom
evil hands
had stood
against the cross:
Easter, Easter,
He did force
to wood and
stone and iron
and conquered,
He who risen,
Hallelujah,
makes us well,
lives today
and ever shall.

Easter, Easter,
the madmen
thought we'll lock
Him in the grave
and stamp it down
with Pilate's seal:
Easter, Easter,
useless ill,
useless watch:
God almighty
has departed,
Himself his master,
Hallelujah,
crossed the stone
before the Eastern
sunlight shone.

Easter, Easter
lark and finch
strike up,
begin,
begin the voice
of man and beast!
Easter, Easter,
offer feast
of flame and
feed the lamp;
blue incense rise
and smoke:
Hallelujah,
God will save,
He is the conqueror
of the grave!

(from *Tijdkrans,* 1893)

Dusk

(Het Hazegrauwt)

Dusk falls early: one
or two hours since,
sun and fire fell
under the rim.

Not lost at once,
the light;
not born at once,
the night.

Dusk: the light that stood
along the lanes,
along the footpaths
and the high road wanes.

The trees as still
as pictures seem;
they stirred and played;
they dream.

They rustled and they spoke,
and now
they play at sleeping,
bough on bough.

The bole, the branches
and the leaves,
blended, lose their
complexities.

Become one colour
and one shape,
they cease to hurry
or escape.

Exhalations crawl
out of the soil
and damply open
and upward coil.

Slowly falls the fog
from the height,
spun and woven,
full of night.

Standing in state,
shrouded, unbent,
the woods are fastened
in their cerement.

The trees have died:
one memorial,
of damp and fog,
shall watch them all.

Now God give rest
to weak and stout;
the obsequies are sung,
the light is out.

Wintermoths

(Wintermuggen)

The wintermoths are
dancing reel on reel
as white as curds
or miller's meal.

They climb at flood
they dive at ebb
weaving as they go
a cold white web.

Their cold white web
will make a wrap
to cover Earth's
immaculate lap.

Earth lies and dreams
in her repose
the virgin's dream
of Spring's new rose.

She lies and dreams
and in her slumber
hears the wonderfully
harping summer.

She lies and dreams
of plenty, feasts,
sufficiency to feed
all men and beasts.

Let her sleep, no noise
must startle her;
let her not, before
the time comes, stir.

For where she rests
the white moths spread
without a sound
her coverlet,

and weave and roll
and trip and reel
whiter than curds
or miller's meal.

Pied Aspens

(Bonte Abeelen)

Now white as gauze, now green,
the dappled aspens gleam.

Up like a goodmorning bell,
leaves tumble on the wind pell-mell.

And every leaf is green on top,
and white beneath, without a spot.

All follow with irrelevance
while winds irrelevantly dance,

and all that foliage beats the air
as though each leaf a feather were.

So flights of pigeons, white and gray,
Make aspens in the sky the livelong day.

The Winds

(De Winden)

The sea is almost still, the sea,
stiller than the trees
where, wild, the winds are riding
without bridles through the leaves.

A shout goes up, ten thousand
and ten thousand leaves,
as though the leaves were human fools
with their ten thousand griefs.

Snores the rain, and lashes
all the thick drops down;
with roars, with moans, the trees
bend low and drown.

Listen! once more, once more
the trumpet and the brawl
the wild winds brawl, once more
the sea with its deep howl.

Unendingly! the birds
are fled, the branches fall,
my voice dies utterly:
the wild winds call.

(from *Rijmsnoer,* 1897)

In the bright glance

(In de blanke lonken)

I sat beside the road
in a trance
under the high moon's
bright glance
and I looked far as I could
with my eye
looking for a certain star
in the sky
and the star shivered and
glanced at me
as though she were alive
and could see
that I too shivered and
looked at her
thinking how small my life
and my stir
thinking I sat there
in the sky
where the star sat so clear
to my eye*

I heard unheard the swarming
of the blessed
the singing of the Heavens
without rest
and the words that angels use
when they speak
one with the other
heavenly meek
I heard the angels prattling
together
and their voices mingling feather
on feather
I saw the planets
in their sport
roll before the footstool
of the Lord
lighter than the sands run
in a glass
lighter than the slipping
hours pass

* I omit two lines which do not rhyme in the original. The poem is posthumous and unrevised, and there is no doubt that Gezelle would have struck out or expanded these lines.

SAMUEL FRENCH MORSE:

The Changes

The world outside looks almost clear:
The window frames a view as fine
And cloudless as the coming cold.
Roofs, chimneys, elm and oak define
The film of light; the late fall air
Still from the south stirs everywhere.

Almost like nineteen twenty-two
When I was six and understood
The world was Mac's big rock-strewn field
Behind our barn, between the wood
(Six birches in a stand of pines)
And the green ditch that still confines

An acre open to the sun.
As proud as Abel of his flock
Mac kept a dozen sheep that year
That fattened on the native rock
And gave the world its peaceful look
Like Eden in a picture book.

The cloudy sheep all grazed one way.
A yellow goat and one black cow
Mac kept there too, made summer seem
The changeless age before the Plow
Hung up in heaven had a name.
The very world was here, the same

From day to day, until the light
Drew down and I was made aware
In grass and shadow at my side
Of something burning everywhere.
The landscape stirred: September, then
A riper warmth, like sleep, again,

Making that arid acre look
More golden in October's haze
Than anything I could recall.
Autumn was on it, then, and days
That ran like color; sumac, dock,
The lichen bleeding in the rock,

Bright-dark, red-brown; but where the sheep
Still grazed, the stubble showed more white.
And even after killing frost
In warming noon, the field grew bright.
But I was not the same. I knew
The world was change my eyes looked through.

ANNE SEXTON:

Torn Down from Glory Daily

All day we watched the gulls
striking the top of the sky
and riding the blown roller coaster.
Up there
godding the whole blue world
and shrieking at a snip of land.

Now, like children,
we climb down humps of rock
with a bag of dinner rolls,
left over,
and spread them gently on a stone,
leaving six crusts for an early king.

A single watcher comes hawking in,
rides the current round its hunger
and hangs

carved in silk
until it throbs up suddenly,
out, and one inch over water;

to come again
smoothing over the slap tide.
To come bringing its flock, like a city
of wings that fall from the air.
They wait, each like a wooden decoy
or soft like a pigeon or

a sweet snug duck:
until one moves, moves that dart-beak
breaking over. It has the bread.
The world is full of them, a world
of beasts thrusting
for one rock, like hideous hens.

Just four, bread scooped out and fierce
go swinging over Glouscester
to the top of the sky.
O see how
they cushion their fishy bellies
with a brother's crumb.

Portrait of an Old Woman on the College Tavern Wall

O down at the tavern
the children are singing
around their round table
and around me still.
Did you hear what it said?
I only said
how there is a pewter urn
pinned to the tavern wall,

as old as old is able
to be and be there still.
I said, the poets are there.
I hear them singing and lying
around their round table
and around me still.
Across the room is a wreath
made of a corpse's hair,
framed in glass on the wall,
as old as old is able
to be and be remembered still.
Did you hear what it said?
I only said
how I want to be there and I
would sing my songs with the liars
and my lies will all the singers.
And I would, and I would but
it's my hair in the hair wreath,
my cup pinned to the tavern wall,
my dusty face they sing beneath.
Poets are sitting in my kitchen.
Why do these poets lie?
Why do children get children and
Did you hear what it said?
I only said
how I want to be there,
O, down at the tavern
where the prophets are singing
around their round table
until they are still.

JACK MATTHEWS:

Sweet Song from an Old Guitar

Elsa trundled about in the kitchen, rattling her coffee cup in a saucer and pacing like a bear, her slippers flapping on the uneven floor.

"God DAMN!" Tommy yelled from the dining room. "Come in HERE to drink your coffee and stop that PACING!"

She appeared at the doorway, shoulders hunched forward, brown sweater twisted on her thick arms. Her pretty aging face was shiny with a kind of lachrymose dew which had settled upon her these past few weeks.

"Now what the HELL is the matter this morning?" Tommy demanded angrily.

"You know what's the matter, Mr. Lott."

"No I DON'T know what's the matter and I don't GIVE a damn. What's more, come in here and sit DOWN with me and drink your coffee. You know I don't like to eat my breakfast alone. That's why I took you on as my housekeeper."

Elsa followed the old man's ferocious mumbling with alarm and, when he finished, her mouth twitched and her eyes glazed with tears. She caught a warning hunch in his shoulders and decided that she had better not indulge in weeping until she was alone in her room. It was not the grouching she minded, but his nastily referring to her as a housekeeper. It brought to her mind discomforting visions of insecurity.

And when she had sat down, he asked her again what the hell was wrong . . . knowing full well, she thought, but just being mean in drawing it out.

"It's almost seven years since I came here," she said slowly, sucking on her lips after the words were out.

"Seven YEARS!" Tommy roared.

"That means, according to my brother who's a lawyer, that in the eyes of the law I'll be your wife, having lived alone and under the same roof with you for that period of time." She said this with the dignity of possessing technical information. "Seven years," she repeated, sipping her black coffee and eyeing him over the rim of her cup, while his head bobbed angrily above his scrapple and eggs.

"God DAMN! Don't the law know I'm already married?"

"The fact that you are already married," she said, speaking calmly and trying to straighten out the silverware at her plate, "doesn't necessarily mean that your wife inherits your estate. Since you've been apart over ten years, and she has never sued you for alimony or even divorce . . ."

"You're AWFUL God damn sure of yourself, aren't you woman? My ESTATE!" Tommy spat a piece of pork gristle out of his mouth, missing his plate and scratching it off the table cloth with his fingernail.

"No, I'm not, Mr. Lott. Who knows, I may not live to collect a thing."

"You're healthy as a damn horse, and HEALTHIER than the front end." Tommy laughed at this, stroking his eyebrows lovingly, his mouth gaping wide, a fleck of egg white on his dry lip.

His crude humour steadied and comforted Elsa. Her hand picked out the cup handle on the first try, and raising the cup six inches off the table she said calmly, "I'm not speaking of the state of my *health,* Mr. Lott."

She waited ponderously for his reaction, but seeing nothing but the top of his head, swinging in preoccupied arcs above the plate, she decided to reveal all. "I mean, Mr. Lott, that I may be DONE AWAY WITH!" She was appalled for an instant, because her voice had come out exactly like his. "That's what living with him so long has done," she told herself.

He cast a small look of interest at her. "Have you taken your nerve medicine today?" he asked.

"My nerves are all right," she said airily. "Oh, you may joke!"

He dropped her from his interest and for a full minute she sat listening to his vigorous chewing.

Then, abruptly, he raised his head enough to see her through his eyebrows and said: "Just what the hell do you MEAN?"

She sucked on her lips for an instant and fondled a teaspoon. Then she said, "I'm not so dumb. Some people may think that I don't know what's going on, but I've got plenty of time to think and my brother being a lawyer . . . don't think I haven't had some good long talks with him."

Having finished breakfast, Tommy subsided into an attitude of meditation. He fingered tobacco out of his can of Sir Walter Raleigh and rolled back in his rocker, bumping the table solidly with his knees. The old house creaked in response to the rocker, or so it seemed to

Elsa, who had never felt completely easy here.

"Just what have you and your brother found out?" Tommy said, without removing the pipe from his mouth.

"Well, what I'm talking about now isn't something I've exactly gotten straight from my brother, but it's something I've figured out with his help, you might say."

"Just what the hell IS it?" Tommy yelled, rocking violently.

"Well, it's about your wife. Mrs. Lott, that is."

"Fern? Hell, Fern wouldn't do NOTHING!" His voice, though loud and emphatic as always, seemed suddenly to lose conviction.

"I wouldn't be so sure of that," Elsa said faintly, a knowing, sad smile on her face.

"Just what would FERN do?"

"Just what wouldn't she do!" Elsa said in a hushed voice. "If you only knew some of the things she's said to me, you wouldn't put up with her ever setting foot in this house again."

Tommy puffed and hummed meditatively, his eyes rolling back in his head and his eyebrows filling with smoke.

"After all, when she left you alone it seems to me that she forfeited any rights she might have had as your wife."

"What rights?" Tommy said quickly, crossing and uncrossing his legs nervously.

"Well . . . just rights. For instance, what if something should happen to you before I go. Then what will I do? According to the law, I might get something if I've lived with you seven years, but . . . well, I've been thinking that maybe Fern means that I shouldn't live with you seven years."

Tommy took the pipe from his mouth and did not try to disguise the wonder in his voice. "You mean DO AWAY WITH YOU?" he bellowed.

Elsa nodded. "I wouldn't put it past her. That woman's not in her right mind. If you only knew some of the things she's said to me, why . . ."

"Fern knows I don't have any money," Tommy said.

Elsa pursed her lips and said nothing, but kept a stubborn look on her face to show Mr. Lott that *she* knew very well he had a sock full of fifty-dollar bills hidden away, and that she knew that *Fern* knew.

"Fern wouldn't do nothing," Tommy said. As he talked, the pipe bobbled up and down and then it sagged abruptly, where the bit was held together with a thick nub of dirty adhesive tape. "God DAMN!"

he bellowed. He righted the bowl and brushed ashes off his trousers.

"Don't forget," Elsa said, "that she's getting older, too. And she might just feel desperate enough to do something, now that she sees the seven years coming to an end. Her brother's dead now and she's all alone. She might want to come back here and get me out of the way so she . . ." Elsa's nose and eyes started burning with tears and she had just barely strength enough to sniff them back.

They sat silently for a few minutes, he puffing on the pipe and casting looks at the weather and she shivering in her sweater. To save on gas bills, he kept the thermostat on sixty-seven.

Finally she said half-aloud, "It's not just any woman who'd put up with what I've put up with, Mr. Lott. When you've been drinking and beaten me with your fists . . . oh, you don't understand what it is to be a woman and helpless and you never did understand your own strength." She said this last to mollify him, for she knew it made him feel proud.

"I've never touched you," he said mildly, still looking out the window and rocking and holding his pipe in his fist while he puffed at it mightily, making it bubble like a silex.

Elsa sucked her lips and said nothing.

Presently, Tommy went outside in his coatsweater (she warned him of both flu and pneumonia), and when he had left, Elsa climbed upstairs to the bedroom to put on a pair of shoes. She heard a car slow down and her heart beat swiftly for a moment.

But the car went on, and Elsa hurried to the window to see if she recognized the license number of Fern's car. Whoever it was had disappeared under the heavy branches of the elms up the street and Elsa calmed herself, thinking, "She'll have a fight on her hands if she tries to turn me out of this house after I've put up with him all this time."

Then she began to cry, and when she walked downstairs, she could not see clearly, feeling her way step by step, her hand on the banister. "If I fell, that would bring him running. And it would bring him to his senses, maybe. How good I've been to him!" Reaching the bottom step, she crossed the hallway and peered through the uneven glass of the door, rattling in the wind. She saw Tommy with his hedge clippers, leaning over the privet and puffing serenely on his pipe.

That evening Elsa decided that she should search for his sock in the storage shed. Tommy decided to go downtown and, when she saw him walk away down the street, she hurried to get her coat out of the closet.

It was a blustery evening, with thick, oily clouds coiling overhead. A stiff wind full of winter chilled Elsa's bare legs.

Inside the musty shed she felt even colder. She groped for the light string and when she found it and turned the light on she was—as always—startled at the clutter about her. Stacks of old newspapers and magazines, boots, old shoes, discarded suits and women's hats from fifty years ago, a neatly coiled garden hose, dessicated and cracked, a broken wheelbarrow full of jelly glasses, cigar boxes crammed with rusty nails and bolts and sticks of wood . . . so many things, indeed, that Elsa was staggered and didn't know where to look first.

But finally she started searching in the clothes, going through each pocket with numb fingers. As she was picking at an old frock coat she heard a scraping sound at the shed door.

She whirled around and there stood Fern, poised and bright-eyed.

"Mrs. Lott!" Elsa gasped.

"That's my name," Fern said, staring at her brightly and working her mouth back and forth as if she were chewing on something. She was a dumpy, erect woman with thick gray hair growing sturdily out of her head, which she kept partially covered with a felt hunter's hat sporting a long pheasant feather.

"And what are you doing in Mr. Lott's shed?" Fern asked, nodding her head up and down as if she were answering yes.

"Why, I'm just looking for a better broom than Mr. Lott keeps up there in the kitchen."

"Well, look away, my dear, for you won't find a thing in this old shed."

She turned and left Elsa standing there and looking about her at the confusion in the shed. Then she realized with horror that she was still holding the frock coat. And that despicable woman had seen her seaching it!

And what was Fern doing here?

She hurried into the kitchen, sniffing as she walked, as if she might smell disaster in the air.

But in the house all was quiet. She saw Fern in the hallway, taking off her coat, and she rushed in.

"Here, I'll take that and hang it up in the closet," she said.

But Fern drew it back sharply. "You act as if I was a stranger or something," she said, showing her expansive teeth in a hearty smile. "Goodness, I guess I know my way about my own house."

"I suppose you do at that," Elsa said numbly, fingering the newel

post and gazing at the healthy roundness of Fern's body.

"Of course I do."

"You look robust," Elsa said, gathering herself together.

Fern looked above her airily and walked into the sitting room. "Same old-fashioned furniture," she said as she sat back in a rocker, kicking her feet and thumping the arms with her fists.

And then: "Where's Tommy?"

"He went out about an hour ago. Downtown, I suppose."

Fern arched an eyebrow up at Elsa. "Drinking?"

"Lord, I hope not!" Elsa said in spite of herself. And then: "May I get you a cup of coffee? Have you had dinner?"

Fern lurched out of the chair and walked to the kitchen. "My, I guess I know how to make coffee!"

When Fern had the percolator going above the gas flame (turned so high Elsa could smell the wood handle scorching), she looked directly to Elsa and said, "You know I'm still married to Tommy."

Elsa tried to say something but her throat was glued together.

Fern continued: "Now that my brother's dead, I have no place to go. And this is my home, legally speaking."

"What about my seven years!" Elsa managed to gasp.

"What's that? What's that?"

"I've been here seven years, and you've been separated over ten years! According to the law, you don't have any more rights!"

"Who's to say ten years?" Fern took off the spitting coffee pot and placed it on the frayed linoleum counter.

"The neighbors," Elsa said. "Everybody."

Fern looked thoughtful a minute. Then she sighed. "Well, let's be friends. There's no need of our quarreling . . . although I put up with him for over twenty years, and it seems a downright sin that you should just put up with him only seven, and then come in for all his money. And speaking of the money, I'm surprised you'd bother looking out there in the shed. Tommy'd never hide it out there. I guess I know him better than that.

And at that instant, they heard Tommy on the porch.

"He must be all right," Elsa said.

"Yes, at this time of night, he must be sober," Fern agreed.

Tommy walked into the kitchen, his mouth open in wonder. "God DAMN!" he said when he saw Fern.

"Hello, Tommy," she said brightly.

"You back here AGAIN?"

"That's right, Tommy."

"Well, there ain't nothing for you here, woman. You left ten years ago and that was your choice. I got nothing for you here. My housekeeper and I manage pretty well." Elsa could not help noticing a sudden meekness in him. And his glances through his eyebrows suddenly appeared guilty and abashed, instead of ferocious.

Fern was laughing confidently. "Tommy rot, Tommy Lott," she said, gurgling.

Tommy charged out of the room. "Get rid of her, Elsa," he said.

Fern looked at her and laughed whoopingly. "Isn't he a crusty old dusty?" she shrieked. And then they heard Tommy pounding the floor in his rocker.

Elsa felt she could have killed her on the spot.

Although Fern left that night, she appeared early the next morning, walking in the front door without knocking.

Tommy was smoking in his rocker at the table and Elsa was cleaning up after breakfast.

"Would you like some breakfast?" she asked Fern as she appeared in the kitchen.

"Land sakes no! I've eaten hours ago. I'm used to getting up early and getting my day organized. I couldn't get so much done if I didn't."

Elsa could see Tommy's head peering around the door at Fern every time his rocker came forward. He was puffing up a cloud of pipe smoke and his eyebrows were thick and low.

"Well, hello, Tommy!" Fern beamed, as if she hadn't seen him until this instant. "What are you doing in there all alone? Nobody to keep you company?"

"Don't need no God damn COMPANY!"

"Lord, but this house is in a mess!" Fern said, looking all around over Elsa's head. "You need a woman here, Tommy, to take care of you."

She walked with tiny, prim steps into the dining room while Tommy roared in irritation, pretending he was clearing his throat at the end.

"Just look at this house, will you? I'm going to do some cleaning and organizing for you today."

"Don't NEED any!"

"Oh, come on now, Tommy! A Tommy Lott you know about such things. Men don't even pay attention to things like that, but they appreciate it when it's done."

"I think I just ought to tell you," Elsa said at the kitchen doorway, her voice hoarse, "that I clean this house each and every day and I reckon I do a whole lot better job of taking care of my OWN affairs than some other people I could name!"

But Fern was walking into the front room, head thrown back and eyes searching the corners. "If you want to help, Elsa, you could use some wallpaper cleaner on these walls, and I'll just go upstairs and start tidying things up on the third floor. That's a regular firetrap up there. The idea of all those papers and magazines and things up there has always worried me."

Fern started up the steps. Tommy and Elsa listened in awe for a moment as the stairs creaked on up to the third floor.

"God DAMN!" Tommy whispered hoarsely. "She cleaned me out once before and now she's going to do it again!"

"What do you mean?" Elsa cried.

"Oh LORD! I've hid some money up there, some place, and I can't remember where!"

Elsa threw her hands up in the air. "Let's go up and look, too."

Tommy hurried out of his rocker and strode across the floor. "She cleaned me out once before when she left."

"She'll find the money and leave again. Just leave us alone to starve!" Elsa cried out, following him. "Are you sure it's up there? I've been through the third floor several times, just sorting things out."

"It's up there somewhere," Tommy said, panting in his pipe and stopping to rest a moment at the top of the first flight of stairs.

"Can't you remember where?"

"No. GOD DAMN if I can!"

The third floor consisted of two dingy rooms on either side of the stair entrance. The floors of both sagged away from the small hallway and the ceilings were slanted from the gabled roof. Each room had a single window with the bottom sill almost touching the floor. The rooms were filled with the accumulations of Tommy's life. He still made occasional trips to the third floor, carrying any old thing that was beginning to get in his way. Fern had frequently referred to him as a pack rat or a magpie, building his nest high up under the eaves.

Now, Fern was bending stiff-legged over a box of family photographs albums. When Elsa and Tommy reached the doorway she turned and walked swiftly toward them.

"It's no bother for me to do this. You two would just get in my way up here. Now shoo on downstairs and leave me alone while I do my work."

"WOMAN!" Tommy roared. "Get out of my house. You're TRESPASSING, GOD DAMN IT!"

"Oh, Tommy rot, Tommy Lott! Now just turn around and get back downstairs where you belong. You go downstairs with the housekeeper."

"Don't forget I've been here just about seven years!" Elsa shrieked.

"Seven, eleven," Fern said, frowning. "Can't you ever get that silly number out of your silly head?"

"OUT OF MY HOUSE!"

"Just call the police, Mr. Lott!" Elsa suggested.

"Why, what an awful to-do you both are making. You certainly don't think anybody'd put me out of my own house."

"You've been away ten years; you can't just push me out!" Elsa said.

"Of course . . . now I know. That's it. You think you can just come in here and take over my house, not to mention my husband, just because I happen to be living with my sick brother, and now when my poor brother's dead, you think I don't have any right to come back. Oh, I know your kind, but you can't pull that sort of trick on me. So just stop trying. And you too, Tommy Lott—why, I'm ashamed of you, siding with this woman!"

"I AIN'T SIDING WITH NO WOMAN! I JUST WANT YOU TO GET OUT!"

"And where would you expect me to go, pray tell?"

"Go back to your brother."

"He's dead and you know it."

"Well, that's all right with me."

"Tommy, this is not time for a Tommy-joke."

"OH LORD!"

They suddenly had no more to say to one another. Tommy and Elsa started going through things in the other room and Fern continued where she had left off.

It was not long until Elsa was attracted by a rattling semi-musical sound. She looked up and there was Tommy with a dusty, battered guitar in his hands, plucking a flaccid E string and frowning mightily. Then he cast the instrument roughly aside, and when it jarred against a cardboard box, Elsa saw a piece of faded blue cloth in the circular hole beneath the strings. Prudently she said nothing. And by the time they had all decided to quit for lunch, her stomach was so screwed up with excitement that she was afraid to open her mouth lest her voice break.

When Fern left that evening, Tommy was "in an awful state" (as Elsa expressed it to herself), fumbling about the first floor like a wounded sea lion, shagging his eyebrows at Elsa, cursing Fern with the eloquence of a blasphemous Moses, complaining of his stomach, the wind blowing leaves all over his sidewalks, aching feet, the price of lumber (God knows what he wanted to build, Elsa thought), the crime rate, deterioration of property in his neighborhood (where his house seemed to Elsa the most decrepit), sewer taxes, lawyers, over-emphasis in college athletics, and the Anti-Saloon League.

Reaching this last topic, Tommy veered steadily for the wooden cabinet beneath the sink, and Elsa thought Oh Lord several times and began to take inventory of the Tommy-inflicted bruises on her body. The old man filled a jelly glass half full of whiskey and then sloshed in some water from the faucet. He went to his rocker and sat there drinking for several minutes.

Then he made another drink and filled his pipe and turned on the radio. Elsa, sitting huddled in the living room, realized that he was suddenly as calm as a field of July wheat, and, peering around the corner of a sliding door, she saw him looking obviously contented. "He's like a little boy," she said to herself. Feeling profound, she settled down to waiting for Tommy to lurch off to bed, so she would be free to go to the guitar.

The thought made her jittery and she suddenly felt that she couldn't wait any longer. She went into the kitchen and got his whiskey bottle and brought it into the dining room, putting it on the scarred table in front of his nose.

He stared at it for a minute and then looked up at Elsa with varnished eyes.

"Well, I'll be diddledly damned!" he said in a hushed voice.

Elsa smiled at him timidly. "I like you to be happy, Mr. Lott!"

And for some reason, tears sprang to Elsa's eyes and she hustled out of the room, leaving Tommy humming into his pipe.

When the hands of the Black Forest clock pointed to ten-twenty, Tommy started fussing with the blinds. This was a sure sign that he was about to go to bed. He raised a blind, peered out into the blackness of night, hummed half-words to himself, sucked on his pipe and trotted to another blind, which he lowered all the way—for no reason that Elsa could understand. Often she had explained to herself that Tommy was just plain disorderly, and that was why he couldn't seem to go to bed with any two blinds drawn to the same height.

One of the blinds flew ripping to the top of a high window, and Tommy cursed happily, while Elsa's stomach coiled with impatience. But the old man was too far gone in liquor to find the blind now, so he rolled across the floor and potted along up the stairway.

When Elsa heard his shoes hit the floor, she called out, "Goodnight, Mr. Lott!" But he didn't answer, and in another five minutes or so Elsa heard him snoring loud enough to rattle the frame of the house.

Then Elsa climbed up to the third floor, her heart hammering and her eyes fluttering. Reaching the top landing, her hand trembled as she groped for the wall switch. The yellow light came on and Elsa went straight for the guitar. When she had picked it up, she cocked her head, listening for a moment to the snoring. Then she thrust her hand through the strings and clutched a small bundle wrapped in a faded blue bandanna. Quickly she opened it and there was the money, in a tight roll.

The bills were held together by old rubber bands which broke when she pulled on them. She laid the money out in neat stacks, counting nine fifties, twenty-seven twenties and forty-three ten dollar bills.

Downstairs, Tommy lurched on his bed and groaned. Elsa trembled all over for an instant. Then she picked up the money in both hands and started down the steps.

At the bend in the stairway she could hear the wind outside and, glancing through the narrow, ecclesiastical window there, she could see the shadows of tree limbs and of telephone wires swaying in the light from the street lamps. There seemed to be no one outside on the streets, nor even lights on in the neighboring houses.

Reaching her room, she quickly took her suitcase down from the shelf in the closet and placed two house dresses in it. Then she sat in the old oak rocker by the bed and cried a little, thinking all at once of the seven years, and terrible old Tommy, and her lost life, and the uncertainties that faced her now at the age of sixty-seven.

Then she rolled her stockings up above her knees and put on her best dress, deciding to leave the old house dress she had been wearing. She brushed her hair quickly and stuck big pins all over to hold it in place. Then she set a small, flowered hat squarely on her head and stood looking around the room.

The ticking clock by her bed said two minutes till twelve. And then another day, a new life.

She picked up her suitcase and walked into the hallway, peering into Tommy's room. A rectangle of light from the hall lay on the floor

and dimly illuminated the table by Tommy's bed. On it she could see the faint sparkle of the water glass holding his teeth.

The floor of the hall creaked loudly as she picked up the suitcase and stepped forward. She realized that the old man had not drunk enough to sleep soundly. After she had descended three steps, she heard a loud, snorting noise from Tommy's room.

"Who du hell DERE?" he bellowed sleepily, his voice sounding muted with his teeth out.

"It's just me, Mr. Lott," she said in a quavering tone.

"Jut what du hell you DOING?"

She bit her lip and her face twitched and trembled all over. She was in a panic . . . she had no idea what to tell him. She opened her mouth and started to tell him the truth, then stopped with a gasp, the sound of the words in her mind terrifying her.

"Jut what du hell TIME id it?"

She heard the bed springs squeak as he leaned over reaching for his watch.

"I don't know," she answered softly.

"Well, get du hell back to BED."

For an instant she stood on the steps, her face puckered tightly, tears burning her eyes. Then, afraid he might actually get out of bed, she hurried back to her room.

Tommy called out again: "Are you going to BED?"

"Yes, Mr. Lott."

She heard him sigh and turn over.

Then she slowly undressed, and while she was hanging her dress up in the closet, the thought occurred to her for the first time that she could continue to live here and put the money in a bank. After all, it was a kind of home, even though it wasn't a very good one. "And I'll let Fern know about it," she said to herself. *"Then* she'll stay away!"

And if Tommy was ever nasty to her again—that is, really, very, *awfully* nasty—why, she could just get up and leave.

But right now, tonight, she didn't dare.

Suddenly, she felt independent, optimistic. These were strange feelings to her, and she explained to herself, as she pulled the covers up to her chin, "It just shows what money can do."

SAM BLEUFARB:

Point of View

An Interview with Wright Morris, July, 1958

The novelist Wright Morris was a visiting professor at the University of Southern California in the summer of 1958. The following interview was tape-recorded one afternoon while he was on campus. (A slight amount of editing was, of course, necessary for this transcript.)

A man of slender though sinewy build, Wright Morris gives one the impression of a carefully husbanded, forceful energy. His sandy hair, greying at the temples, trails back in abundant masses from a high, tanned forehead. His reddish moustache looks as though it might stand up in protest at any tonsorial attempt to thin it out or trim it down. His finely formed hands, looking as if they have been exposed to their share of tough manual labor, frequently add expressive emphasis of gesture to his words.

Morris has a Twainsian wit, which reflects both his Midwestern roots and his own pungent personality. He is extremely impatient with the cant and clichés of official critics, but has a kindly word for the young writers who may ask a naive question but ask it in all sincerity. He is puckish too, and is often given to teasing those who take themselves too seriously. Yet the witticism and the puckishness are not ends in themselves, but serve to cast light on the problems confronting the writer today—amateur as well as professional.

* * *

INTERVIEWER: When did you decide to become a writer?

WRIGHT MORRIS: Well, I'd gone abroad at the end of my college years, and I had at that time no idea of becoming a writer at all. But at the end of a year abroad, in 1934, like many young men in Paris, I went around with a kind of *avant garde*. I ran into some people who were interested in writing. And I think it was the atmosphere, those writers, which brought into focus what had up until that time been amorphous in my own approach to writing. I had done some writing

in college. But it was the kind of writing one does because one has a little facility for it. Just as some of the boys painted.

INT: While in Paris did you come into contact with any of the remaining exiles?

WM: No. I was there after the huge season of the Twenties. The older fellows had gone home, people like Hemingway and Cowley. At this point it was a new generation that was making its own new exploration of Paris.

INT: So far as your own experience is concerned, would this have some relation to your being labeled a middle generation writer?

WM: I suppose so. Coming so closely after a generation that had fulfilled itself earlier. Fitzgerald and Hemingway were writers of achievement while still in their twenties. Then came the 1930's; a new generation is in the wings here. But there was a postponement of that generation's achievement due to the depression, and through the kind of writing that suddenly became very important to many Americans during the depression. It was essentially documentary reporting. However, the situation is closely related to me in that I did not belong to the earlier generation nor did I belong to the one that came after the following war. I am an outgrowth of the depression period, but I've never been a documentary writer, and this in a sense has left me without a school.

INT: Would you say then that the earlier school was an influence in your writing?

WM: In some ways. But not directly. Oddly enough, at the time I began to write, I had not read the great writers of the twenties; all of my reading in college had been of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, a little of the nineteenth. So that when I began to write I therefore had no idols of my own that were contemporary. In a sense I began from scratch. I made contact with the writers of the Twenties, but saturated myself in what I liked about them much later. Almost ten years later. It was only after I had in a sense had a certain amount of achievement as a writer, put in all my apprenticeship, that I discovered the Twenties.

INT: Because of the bull-ring setting, have you found that there has been any misinterpretation of your intention in *The Field of Vision?*

WM: Not as much as the situation warrants, since it is a complex book very closely related to all the books that have gone before it.

Because of the book award,[1] and the paperback reprint following it, it was read by people who had not read my earlier books; for them to have come to this book without some background reading in some of the other books was, I would say, a jarring, disorienting experience. They really needed more in the way of understanding what was going on, more than what the book actually presumed to offer. I might add here parenthetically that I believe that perhaps few writers of my time write so much out of all their books, so that an exposure to all the books in a way is necessary to the book that comes next. You will find an acute instance of this in *The Cannibals* book.

INT: Of all your novels, which one do you feel to be most quintessential of your work? Or would you say there is such a novel?

WM: That's a hard one. Any pat answer would tend to be an oversimplification and misleading because, curiously, a book which appears to be out of the stream of my Midwest concerns is apt to saturate most of the books and make an appearance in fragments in all of them. But *The Deep Sleep,* which presumably concerns life and death in suburban Philadelphia, is very instructive and casts some light on all my books, anticipating them—and this is especially true in *The Field of Vision*—in the techniques employed. This was four or five years ago, and I think it is one of the most successful examples of my method of developing a story.

INT: The styles of your novels seem to vary considerably. I'm thinking particularly of such widely diverse novels as *Love Among the Cannibals, The Huge Season,* and *The Field of Vision.* Would you say there was a conscious effort on your part to slough off the previous experience as you go on towards the future?

WM: Well, there again it's a difficult question to answer accurately. There is a certain amount of processing of material in the hope it will lie in the past, and remain there. But again it is the nature of the way in which I process my fiction or my raw material. I always go forward in a kind of circular motion, so that I touch on the old as I roll forward towards the new. I comment on this incidentally quite specifically in the summarizing statement in *The Territory Ahead,* the essay in the Hicks anthology.[2] One of my problems as a fiction writer has been to process in fragments an experience that has been so wide and so varied that the fragmentary approach seems almost compulsive to me. I had to take the many

[1] The novel received the National Book Award of 1956.
[2] *The Living Novel* edited by Granville Hicks, 1958.

lives that I had led as a young man; I had to take them singly, piecemeal, and put them together in order to understand who I was. It is only recently that an effort at synthesis has been possible. The change in styles of course will depend very much on the nature of the raw material and the characters involved.

INT: I understand you are working on a book of criticism now. How far along are you on this project?

WM: Well, a summary statement of it appeared in the Hicks' anthology, *The Living Novel,* published this last year. A book that develops that idea more completely will be published by Harcourt Brace this fall.[3]

INT: California has never produced a truly regional literature as the South has. In your visits to California, have you noticed any evidence of such a growing self-consciousness on the part of California writers?

WM: I think that's possibly a loaded question today. When I was out here in school twenty-five years ago, it was understood, almost accepted, that, given time, California would produce its own cultural artifacts and its own cultural giants. Time has unhappily eroded that notion considerably. Most of the writing about California is by imported men who respond to its stimulation—I'm thinking of Nathaniel West as an example. Such native literature as I am familiar with—like Steinbeck's—is apt to be almost rural, harking back in nostalgic terms to the California of yesterday, not to the California which haunts the imagination and defies the effort to come to terms with it of both the alien and the native writer.

INT: Earlier, you mentioned that you were probably not influenced by the social novel of the Thirties. But would you say that your work has a message in it at all?

WM: No. I think the idea of a message would be misleading in precisely the way the word has overtones that are misleading. Any writer who develops a body of work will be found to be hammering away at an idea, attempting to develop it, to give it depth, to come to terms with it, so to speak; but I think the notion of a message was never part of my experience at the consicous level. In a sense the Thirties were rather curiously alien to my own interests, and this is why, again, I think you will find that I am a part of neither a group nor a coterie, but have had to process what is an aspect of American experience that no particular group can be identi-

[3] *The Territory Ahead,* which was published by Harcourt Brace in the fall of 1958.

fied with. It might be called, in a way, "my America" rather than, let's say, a group's America. I do not belong to the North, the South, the West or any other region.

INT: Do you have any immediate plans for a new novel?

WM: One is always working on a new novel. In my case it grows out of the one that is nearing completion, and it is sometimes hard to say whether the end of the last manscript directly leads into the opening of the one that follows it. I would say that the last book and the book that is to come are linked imaginatively so that a chain reaction seems to be taking place. At least that's the situation I usually find myself in. I can usually see the rudiments of the later book in the earlier one. So that when I start work on the new one, I have some notion at least where I am bound.

INT: Did you publish short stories before you published your first novel?

WM: No. I put in a long apprenticeship due to complexities we needn't go into here, but which came of my interests in combining photographs and texts. Some of the texts were very dense—short in style—they were like prose poems, and they were so closely related to the photographs that I never thought of exhuming them. Parts of them appeared in such books as *The Inhabitants* and *The Home Place,* which of course reflect on that interest.

INT: Is this combination of skills a satisfactory medium?

WM: It was satisfactory to me—for a time. But I found that there were innumerable difficulties: one, the expense of such books; two, the limited number of people who take an interest in such books; and, three, the rather curious but crippling fact that I found that those who read did not like the photographs, and those who looked did not like to read. I was really side-saddled in a situation where I was literally obstructing myself all the time. My friends who read would say, "Well, really, you know it's a great pity to have all these pictures in there. They just distract. They introduce elements that are really alien to the fiction." Then I had those who liked the pictures who'd say, "You know, one day I hope to get around to what you've got on those pages, but in the meantime what a pity that the pictures just couldn't appear separately!"

INT: Before you sit down to write a novel, do you draw up an outline?

WM: No.

INT: Do you work directly on the typewriter, or do you do your

first drafts in longhand?

WM: I have moved over from the longhand—which I started with—to the typewriter. I find longhand inhibitory now. It seems too slow to keep up with the thought, and until I see it, I am not really reassured of its accuracy, or the quality I would like about it.

INT: Do you have any set schedule for writing?

WM: Yes. Until the habit is formed, forming the habit takes too much energy. You rely on the habit to get you into a position. Usually, I start work in the morning, work three or four hours, break; usually work again for an hour and a half, break. And if I'm actually involved and imaginatively at work on a book, I am apt to work around the clock, the only instructing or limiting factor being fatigue. I think it is an alien and crippling idea to believe that one works for a few hours, then stops. You cannot turn the imagination off as you would a faucet. If you are really engaged in what you are doing, your mind goes on being engaged, so you might as well work.

INT: How do you reconcile this then with Hemingway's idea that you finish each day's work at such a point where you have more to say, so that when you start work the next day, you have something to say and needn't flounder around for an opening?

WM: Any man who writes as well as Hemingway has worked out something that works for him. There is in this the kind of shrewdness that is in most of his remarks on writing, if he is actually interested in giving you an honest answer. For his type of writing, which is so closely based on tone and the maintenance of style, it's very important for him that he keeps himself alert and sharp to the slightest nuance in style; therefore, he gives himself a limited period of time, and then calls it a day. Each man here must find out how he can do, and this type of self-awareness and the capacity to know your limitations about your working is part of the business of learning to be a writer.

INT: Do you revise a great deal?

WM: It depends on the book. Some books, as one learns more about writing, seem (in that kind of gracious illusion) to write themselves, though a limited amount of tacking back and touching up is necessary. They have the effect of wonderfully executed water colors, to which only framing is necessary, the proper mat to set them off. You go back and touch them up. I've had such books in the past. They're apt to be, as they look, simple, but with a good deal of

resonance in their simplicity. A complicated book, like *The Field of Vision,* calls for elaborate connecting intransience, and in fact the whole elaboration has to become part of the writer's relationship to the book. And this takes time.

INT: What was the germinating idea for *The Field of Vision?*

WM: It grew out of three books that chronologically preceded it. Each book carried the same idea to a further development. Essentially, the idea of audacity in American life. But of course here again I'm dealing with an elaborate background, an elaborate milieu, the Midwest, to which audacity of a certain kind is both native, and, by a singular irony, quite alien. This is worked out quite specifically in *The Field of Vision* in Boyd's predicament with audacity, his boyhood dream of walking on water; the kind of thing you get in McKee, his colleague and childhood friend, who is both attracted to Boyd and somewhat baffled by him, and feels himself alien to Boyd precisely because of this. Yet it's the attraction-repulsion that is instructive in the Midwestern psychology—almost goes back to Western fiction where it is all black or all white.

INT: What determined your technique in *The Field of Vision?* It seems to be largely stream-of-consciousness rather than an objectively wrought dramatic narrative.

WM: It's a technique that I suppose might be called native to me. It will be found in all of the books once they take on the shape of novels. The same thing will be found in *The Man Who Was There,* which is an early novel of a rather complicated type in which voices of characters speak and drop out, and another character appears. The style is determined by its effort to identify itself completely with the character it represents. It has no other ambition than to make that identification complete and convincing.

INT: Would you call yourself an experimental writer?

WM: Every writer who is strictly contemporary and is attempting to deal with things that have not been dealt with before is an experimental writer.

INT: What do you think of writers associating with each other. Do you think this could be harmful to the writer?

WM: It can, but what can't? Writers exposing themselves to other writers is simply a way of saying that they're exposing themselves to hazardous experience. I think that insofar as we feel there might be a danger here, it lies in the milieu problem. That is, writers gathering together in colonies, or something like this. Or

the problem of the writer in New York who perhaps meets too many other writers. I think there is a danger where a stimulus, useful perhaps in imaginative activity, is released by talking out what you have to say. There are mysterious springs in imaginative activity. If these springs are released at the wrong time, what should lie behind the tension, what should lie in the inhibition, is spent. The tension is relaxed, and the energy which should express that tension peters out. I think that colonies of writers or over-stimulating psychological environments defeat consequential fiction. I think that the evidence, if we look into it, would substantiate us here. It is why, essentially, writing is a lonely business, and will always be so. Because it is the writer in a dialogue with himself that works out the the consequential problem. The dialogue with others can be instructive, fruitful even in some cases, but of secondary importance. Sometimes, where you get the understanding of other writers who are both critical and sympathetic, then you're getting into professional relationships that may help. Again, it depends where the help comes from, and who is receiving it. A young writer may sometimes need, as Melville needed Hawthorne, a professional colleague for whom he has complete respect. At the same time, this colleague must be sympathetic and honest—a very delicate problem. But it is possible. And for the writer who dreams of such a thing it is a legitimate dream. But he should not retire from his own milieu to such an extent that he talks exclusively to himself. Nor should he get into it to such an extent that he does nothing but talk.

INT: In the past few days (in your class lectures) you've touched on the role of the cliché in fiction. Would you expand on this now?

WM: By the cliché I mean anything that has served its purpose. Now in terms of fiction this gets to be a very complicated judgment, because it is the responsibility of first-rate art to avoid second-hand experience. The writer must come to terms with experience in fresh terms which, technically, and in purely textual terms, is a question of how you confront and handle the problem of the cliché. The writer, more than perhaps anyone else, inherits a stock of clichés which he assumes to be his own experience. But he has really just inherited this material. And the processing of this material is what gives it distinction and vitality. As an aside here, I think that what distinguishes American fiction from, let us say, English fiction, is that the American writer of genius always processes his language anew. He virtually invents a language that will handle and process

what is fresh and compulsive in his experience. The English writer inherits such a tradition of facility that there seems to be no need to process the language. He inherits so much. And the skill with which the average English novel is written may be compared with the naive and immature way in which the American novel is written. Yet the American novel will be real at precisely those points that the English novel will be false. The number of Englishmen who are able to break out of the traditional language, in short to process the language, is increasingly rare. They are very few. And the vitality of American fiction is already making itself felt among the younger writers there, as it has all over the world. I believe the key to this lies in the processing of language to meet the nature of experience.

INT: Could you name any writers whom the unpublished writer might read with profit, especially in the area of technique?

WM: I don't believe I have anything of interest to say on that. The number of competent writers is really great today, as we are aware. I would say, as I do in such discussions, that the American writer should go back to the Twenties. He should by-pass the Thirties, and go back to the Twenties, which is essentially the period of discipline and control; the writers of the Twenties fell under the spell of men who took writing professionally with the greatest seriousness. They set up standards which, I believe, the public began to weary of—and the writers too, I might add. It was fatigue that brought on the end of Thomas Wolfe—fatigue with form, fatigue with discipline. Discipline is really quite alien to American experience. We like the notion that we are too big to shape, that we are too powerful to hold back, and that we have more to say than language will bear. All this was quite congenial to Wolfe's temperament. But it was part of his self-destruction. After Wolfe it was increasingly difficult for the new writers to get back to the old. So in a sort of summing up, I'd say (to the young writer) go back to the Twenties and earlier.

INT: Which writer do you feel to be the most influential of the present generation of post-war writers—or would you say there is any one writer who is an influence?

WM: As far as I can judge, I would say that Salinger is a writer who has been an influence on the younger generation. He seems to speak for them in their complexity, just as Hemingway, in his simplicity, seemed to speak for a generation in the Twenties. In a sense here, Salinger is playing a self-limiting role because he is appealing to

the intelligent, self-aware adolescent. On another plane, perhaps Saul Bellow is an influential, or at least a respected and competent, craftsman who can always be looked ahead to for an experiment that will be of interest to the writer as well as the reader.

INT: During one of your class lectures, you mentioned Proust, Joyce, and Mann as being the prime movers of the twentieth-century novel. Do you see these three writers growing, or diminishing, in importance for the immediate future?

WM: This is a hard one. Because whenever one has the necessity to label a monument, there is something alien about it. In class, this was instructive in the diagram I was making. But I'm not so sure it's instructive in practice. I don't believe many young writers today go back and read Proust and Joyce as models. I think they accept them as monuments. And on occasion they refer to them—and this will come later—just as I refer to them. I read both of these men, but this was a later act. It is a professional return to see how an expert does it. But I believe these men ended something, and they began nothing. Joyce marks the end of that kind of imaginative processing of his experience. And Proust marks the end of a parenthesis. You might say that this was almost carried to an extremity by James. Mann, precisely because he is the most difficult to place (he's really a Nineteenth-Century master in terms of style), is an irony. It would be quite ironic if this master of irony, because he fits into no school and appears to be so unrelated to formal and technical problems, should prove to have more imaginative influence than the great masters of technique, like Joyce and Proust.

INT: As American writers go, would you call yourself a grass-roots writer?

WM: I'm not sure that the term means anything any more. I'm afraid that it would be misleading, because grass roots are now getting to be increasingly difficult to find in Nebraska and Iowa as they are in Grammercy Square.

INT: Would you say there was any of the influence of Willa Cather in your own work?

WM: No. We both came from the plains. But here again is a writer I read only after I had become a writer myself. And except for parallel responses to plains environment, I think there is little connection. Temperamentally, we both seemed to like a controlled, disciplined treatment of that environment. But that we both happen to come from Nebraska is almost accidental in casting any light on any common elements which may exist.

INT: Do you feel you are reaching more people lately?

WM: I don't know that I *feel* it, but there is a certain amount of evidence that I am. The paper-back book extends a writer into an area that at one time he had no access to. It's a quite different public. They approach books in a very different manner. And since I have been a writer with a limited public in the hardcover field, with a certain consistent, but hard core of readers, to suddenly move out into an arena where a book is picked up to pass an hour out of curiosity while you're sitting at a luncheon table, or just to carry something in your pocket, to leave in a train seat is of course a new experience for me. The book that falls into the hands of such a reader is received with the fewest of conditioned, educated inhibitions. We can as yet make no assessment of the nature of that type of reading experience, the experience that the casual reader gets from a paperback. He receives a sublimated or undercurrent of meaning which is only available to the reader whose particular sympathies are experienced with reading, and if he is alert, he will find that he is reading the book on two levels. This I think occurs perhaps thousands of times. But as yet I think we have no way to assess this, as we usually do with a hardcover book. That public—we only know that it's there. We know that up until now it was not available to writers of my kind of fiction.

INT: Have you received any responses from the paperback public since *The Field of Vision* and *Love Among the Cannibals* were put into paperback?

WM: I would say—a few. But not more. That is, I would say the responses to a hundred thousand copies run no more than the responses to three thousand, which might, in its way be instructive. Now a man picks up and buys a book for thirty-five cents, reads it, leaves it in the train seat, at the house of a friend, or just throws it into the cardboard box that goes into the basement. It is unavoidably true that this man's feeling about his experience is somewhat depreciated by the availability of that experience. Here is an irony, here is a paradox that we have no resolution for. But if it comes too easy, it goes too easy. I made serious sacrifices to avail myself of certain books—a copy of *The Sound and the Fury,* and early copies of two of Anderson's books which I sought for years, and finally paid two dollars for—certainly, what those books gave me was in proportion to what I had to give to get them, measurable not only in dollars and cents, but incalculable in enthusiasm. The paperbook intro-

duces one of those infinite complexities of what a man wants, and what he gets, and how he goes about getting it, for which there is no tangible resolution.

INT: Nostalgia and its uses seem to play a considerable part in your novels. Could you say something about this?

WM: Well, it would be a little like recapitulating the novels. Nostalgia, the past, which I first had to rediscover as a matter of personal self-discovery, can be traced in the novels, I think. First the infatuation with the past, a conviction that the past was real and desirable, and should be the way life is. Then a somewhat scrutinous and skeptical attitude toward the past. Then a serious questioning of the past. After which the present begins to come into the picture. The present and the past play a kind of fugal development in the novels. Then the past begins to be questioned, and over a period of eight novels, the past first dominated, then was compelled to recede. *The Cannibals* is the first book in which the past does not exist. We begin with the present, we live in the present, and it is an effort to come to terms with the present, in terms of only the present. In a way my books show a development of an escape from nostalgia. It is the standard and deep commitment to nostalgia that almost every American writer has; an effort to come to terms with it or to capitulate to it. This almost defines American writing. I think we have Faulkner capitulating to it; I think we have Hemingway's permanent battle with it. His exile is an instance of maintaining himself in the present, but his fiction generally bears witness to the Michigan woods and the notion that a world without men would be a better world. It is essentially a regressive nostalgic commitment. I have had the same problem, and I am working it out in my own fashion. Temperamentally, I now lean very strongly to such an imaginative figure as D. H. Lawrence who in his later years defined to me the serious predicament of a man coming to terms with the present and using the past, not abusing it, in an effort to make this imaginative act possible.

INT: Would you say there is any hope for the future of the novel?

WM: Well, this question is always being formulated by someone, especially in recent years. And is usually answered by somebody who is silly enough, as I am now, to make some comment on it. It grows, I suppose, out of the act of finality that certain men of genius perform like Joyce and Proust, which leads people who do not write novels, and whose essential business it is to talk about people who

write novels, into the need to talk about something. Certainly, one of the most instructive—and if you are facing a sophisticated audience —one of the most "enlightening" postures to take is: is the novel dead? The critic who asks this question often is, the novelist who writes novels often is, but the novel itself is not, dead—so long as men who are alive are writing them.

SUE ABBOTT BOYD:

Directional Signals

It is
time I experimented with
good juices gathered together,
gold flowing from glad vines, gracious
light gliding down delicate stairs.
Days you have tunneled out, tunneled
for my enjoyment are less than
the fruit I jerked from foreign vines,
and little loves left over late-
ly, hanging loves. You remember
how we memorized lines from Proust
your stark naked hands soiling the
nice pages. It was so noisy then
in Peoria, and hard-pressed
matrons hung over moss-fences
entwining their fingers until their
husbands, late lovers (lovers come
lately), were drawn home by curfew
bells. You would remember, too, how
my great aunt, fat, August-favored
belched with every breath she took, took
heart, heart from a neighbor's kitten.
I say to you old-timer, still
trying my patience, Poughkeepsie
was never like this, the Hudson
only runs one way, way away.

R. G. VLIET:

Robert it is Eight Months to the Day

Farrel and you came last down to the pier:
there was rent to pay and Farrel's wage
and the debt on the Kane. But god I'd begged
you to at least admit there's more
in construction or trucking or in factory pay
more cash nowadays in a grocer's
palm and you were handy as most for
these. But always the same and I hated it answer—
I need a work that fits to my hand.

Nothing is but it fits to my hand.
Farming's good: beans corn squash
fit, or cabinetmaking: there's something
snug about a board. I've no green
thumb like my grandpa's nor a carpenter's fine
rule of thumb though I might wish
it, but for sure there's a power of fish
in the sound. And seeing me vexed past
nagging you'd slap the kitchen table
oysterknife scars in your hand's heel
laugh and declare that I was just
a woman who *needs* the smell of fish
(o drag drag your goddamn trawl
below your old John Kane
gun the chrysler hoist the crane
unloosen all that slop of fluke
searobin and queer mud to the deck
spike it all stinking into barrels
like the drunks who poke trash from the green,
ice down your sole, hose down
flounder home and bed-me-down fishscale
codcraw searobin salty mackerel):
there's a *living* in ditchdigging! You got up:
oh yes a living, you said. I broke

that morning the handle off my coffee cup.
Eight months to the day that was ago.

There was three-days' warning by radio
but the tide was high the wind low
the ice already stowed. You said
you must go. In a quiet tantrum
I stood at the window and watched the Kane
crawl out past the farthest island.
Now I walk on the stones below the pier
wind high tide low. Robert I stare
out at the bay and at the sound beyond
the swollen hardhumping low tide
groundswells and wonder. Wonder.
Now I stoop down pick up an oyster
halve in my hand and in my hand
a piece of smooth smoky pebble,
and three small buttons of seaweed
(it's a living you'd say) in my hand
and here now a heavy barnacled
conch slung up from mudsuck and still
meaty inside with snail and I hold
them all

I hold them all in my hand.

RICHARD EMIL BRAUN:

Charity

Listen: what good is testimony now?
You heard him testify four years, the same
as thousands did. Do you remember when
a man shot him? I wasn't there, I heard
it on the air, but that night we all came
and we heard him proclaim he didn't care,
he knew his enemies and they knew him.

Now I was in the choir so I know things.
Like the diamonds on his left hand were quotes,
which in Hebrew means God, and the ruby rings
on his right were x and p, which signifies
Jesus Christ in Greek. When he gave a blessing
he locked hands to show Jesus inside the Lord
and he did likewise when he was healing.

But anyhow that night he was there wearing
a black sling and he said the word and preached
on mercy. You remember those bad times.
Both our husbands were laid off. So you say
that he was rich then and had no charity.
But I can testify he had, because
that night I told him I had no more money.

And he said go to this house in Paradise
Valley and turn up the stairs in the alley.
And there was an old blind woman, wrinkled as
a fig, and breathed hard with her tongue, like a dog,
and she knew what I needed and she said
As many teeth you have, as many eyes,
if you know that much you know all you need.

Listen: what is charity? Charity
is giving what you don't have. He had nothing.
The special robes, holy rings, the Cadillac
were all on time and the Palace was rented,
and some say he's in jail now, and others
say New York, but anyhow two forty-two
came in that week for a thousand dollars.

RALPH J. MILLS, JR.:

Edwin Muir: A Speech from Darkness Grown

(For H. H.)

In the very midst of the intensely creative literary decade that followed World War I, when works of startlingly new character and radical techniques like *The Waste Land, The Tower, Ulysses, The Magic Mountain,* and *Harmonium* rose up from the vast profusion of writing as if by miraculous arrangement, a Scotsman in his middle thirties published an initial volume of poems, almost unnoticed in the turbulent literary affairs of the moment. This small book, with a flavor reminiscent of Hardy, appears unremarkable today, except for a few pieces such as "Horses," "Childhood," "Houses," and "The Ballad of Hector in Hades." The revolutionary techniques of modern verse are nowhere apparent; in fact, there is a tendency towards the archaic that mars many poems. Looking again, we find evidence of a talent that avoids the then new and experimental devices of Pound and Eliot, a talent that draws on the tradition of English romantic and nature poetry and manifests itself in a certain quality and depth of insight. The meeting of this approach to poetry with the modern approaches of German writers—Hölderlin, Rilke, and Kafka in particular—led this poet to a mature style. Yet it would seem that, even at the start, the rendering of some demanding vision had utilized all the poet's energy. The rhythms of these as well as his later poems are neither weak nor inappropriate, though they are of the simplest and most direct kind. One is tempted to say that they adhere to the gesture of the human pulse and heartbeat, so unobtrusive yet fundamental is their measure.

From the publication of *First Poems* (1925) until his recent death, Edwin Muir has produced a varied array of writings, including not only poetry but fiction, criticism, translation, political and philosophical essays, and autobiography. Though his poetry assumes an increasingly modern cast in attitude and theme, he remains aloof in his practice from all prevailing modes and styles; his occasional resemblance to Yeats is merely that. He consistently pursues the course marked out by his thought and art from the beginning. The themes he treats are

familiar ones, and his discovery of a correspondence between his own experience and that of men in most times and places furnished his writing with a fundamental impetus. In a very real sense, it seems that his contact with the thinking of Nietzsche (which he later abandoned) and the innovations of the German poets mentioned above helped him to rise above the derivative quality of his early poems and to speak with the authority of his own voice. It is as if the earth, in reward for his great compassion and sensitivity, reached out through its accumulation of human dust to Muir's imagination, until the experience of the poem he creates surpasses the particularities of the situation in which it took root and cuts across history with the reality it discloses. This does not allow the poet an escape from the difficulties immediate to his own situation, rather it confirms his sense of the perseverance of the problems occupying him. His art is the more striking for the relation it bears to a totality of human experience. From the force of a personal necessity, he has moved to a more expansive notion of the heritage and goal of the whole creation.

Since Muir's interests fasten on the common estate of men, he has drawn on those events and emotions which form the background of all human life: on the impressions of childhood—its innocence and fears; on the transition to adolescence and adulthood with its accompanying knowledge of guilt and death; on the perception of time with the constancy of seasonal cycles and the contradictory perishability of beings and things; on the view of perfection and stability man nourishes and toward which he strives. The movement of his mind, then, from his earliest substantial poetry leads him backward to his origins and, in this manner, to a pristine level of man's existence in the natural order. Behind the facade of details and practicality that characterize daily life in any age, each person, the poet discovers, enacts a drama of greater proportions, moving from stage to stage in a ritual passage from birth to death. This mythic drama in which all participate Muir calls the "fable" of our lives, for it survives from time immemorial as the pattern we body forth in action whether we will it or not. The poet's task, as Muir sees it, involves him in an effort to explore this set of circumstances and elevate it to the plane of conscious art. His struggle for a comprehensive vision starts here—with childhood. And Muir draws up from this deep well, where memory, imagination, and the elements of the world mingle, the legends and scenes of our remotest past, our most ingrained behavior.

In his autobiography, which captures his own passage through these

stages, Muir insists on the precious nature of the child's conception of the world. The loss of this attitude he calculates as irreparable and illustrates it by personal experience, set against the rugged Orkney Island backdrop of his youth. The fall from this stage of life into adolescence and maturity is as serious to his mind as the primeval disaster in Eden that has generated all subsequent history and is closely linked to this event. A disturbing alteration takes place in each individual that recapitulates the disruption of harmonious ties experienced by the first man and woman. Muir writes in "Twice-Done, Once-Done":

> I could neither rise nor fall
> But that Adam fell.
> Had he fallen once for all
> There'd be nothing to tell.*

The difference between the occasions of the two falls recounted here centers around an act of the will and the fabulistic aspect of human life. Adam and Eve violated through choice; the individual child is inescapably doomed through the natural laws of growth and maturation to enter what Muir calls in one poem "the gate" of adult, civilized existence, where the splendor and unity he has known perish. Childhood grants, he says in *An Autobiography,* through some gift of grace, the image of a once permanent condition:

> And a child has also a picture of human existence peculiar to himself, which he probably never remembers after he has lost it: the original vision of the world. I think of this picture or vision as that of a state in which the earth, the houses on the earth, and the life of every human being are related to the sky overarching them; as if the sky fitted the earth and the earth the sky. Certain dreams convince me that a child has this vision in which there is a completer harmony of things with each other than he will ever know again.

His initial bond with innocence broken, the person is thrust into the clamorous turmoil of adult life, which Muir represents by his family's movement from the Orkneys to the industrial city of Glasgow. Within this bewildering maze, beset by guilt and lacking support, he must try to make his way forward against an expanding awareness of failure, tragedy, and destruction that weighs him down. A sense of limitation closes in without mercy, and a mask of personality grows over

* All quotations of poetry are taken from *Collected Poems of Edwin Muir, 1921-1951,* New York, Grove Press, 1957, and *One Foot in Eden,* New York, Grove Press, 1956.

the inner self, threatening to sever the individual from the fullest extent of his being. The falsity of appearances, Muir tells us in a brilliant example of a man examining his reflection in a mirror, offers, when we recognize it, evidence of this self buried beneath the cast living has molded around us. Like Yeats, who understood these divisions, Muir shows us that the face staring back from the glass is curiously alien, almost that of a stranger.

In his poetry Muir has brought to focus those moments when the deceptive veil of things is lifted, allowing a penetration of human situations that repeatedly ride the currents of time and hence belong to a racial memory. The poet's rich dream life, his experience with trance-like states, so graphically described in *An Autobiography,* supply the raw material for much of his art, partaking as they do of man's ancient and fundamental problems and his efforts to evade them. At other times, it may be simply a familiar scene, like that of "Horses," which unaccountably assumes another dimension and nearly obliterates the particular occasion prompting it, until what is beheld seems to rise out of the eternal ground of being with frightening clarity and power:

> Those lumbering horses in the steady plough,
> On the bare field—I wonder why, just now,
> They seemed terrible, so wild and strange,
> Like magic power on the stony grange.
>
> Perhaps some childish hour has come again,
> When I watched fearful, through the blackening rain,
> Their hooves like pistons in an ancient mill
> Move up and down, yet seem as standing still.

In the poem both observer and animals achieve a status akin to timeless myth—of the kind we are used to seeing in the identification of man and the earth in the poetry of Hardy and Lawrence, for they are transfigured by a radiance in which are glimpsed unity and strength associated with the original creation but absent from normal perceptions. Muir has said in his autobiography, as well as in poems like "The Covenant," and "The Animals" (from *One Foot in Eden*), that for him these creatures still exist in the purity of their genesis. Though of a lower order than man, the animals serve as haunting reminders to him of the distance he has come since his exile from paradise. The stark countryside in which Muir grew up, where objects rose with sharp distinction above the plain, slightly hilly, and treeless land, undoubtedly impressed itself as the stage for his dramas

of the imagination. In such an environment obvious things stand out with new significance. Roads, hills, burial mounds, and so on, made available to the poet a ready stock of images which would gain symbolic importance through careful usage.

A grasp of moments of illumination such as we have seen above reveals the "fable" underlying our separate existences, a story that has been carried out by man from the instant he set his foot on earth. Yet, Muir concludes, we can never know the whole tale, which remains hidden from us, only certain stages like Innocence and the Fall. These are the assumptions on which his poetry rests. His youth was steeped in Biblical reading, and he points out in *Transition* (1926) that, though no longer acceptable to intellectual scrutiny, the Biblical cosmogony and stories make a universally understood framework through which to approach the human dilemma poetically. Only the events of a lifetime brought Muir to a realization of his actual belief in this scheme of things. The arduous passage to his final viewpoint can be traced in the themes and metaphors of his poetry.

II

One of the most persistent demons inhabiting the consciousness of modern writers is the sense of time. For poets as different in their ultimate outlook as T. S. Eliot and Dylan Thomas, the encounter with the temporal order in its various manifestations engages them in an aspect of the human situation from which they cannot withdraw to a vantage point of objectivity. Among other ideas of time, cyclical theories of history, we know, have had a basic appeal to twentieth-century poets and novelists. Such theories emphasize the permanence of man in the face of religious skepticism and solidify notions of human fraternity by outlining the similarities of action or behavior from age to age. In a period of intense personal suffering and tragedy on a broad scale, they offer a view beyond specific events to a cosmic pattern for the general life of mankind. But it is one thing to recognize this as a possible attitude and quite another to find it convincing on an individual level.

This disparity between the person's sense of his own destiny and that of humanity plunges Muir, in his long poem "Variations on a Time Theme," into the predicament born of man's connection with time. Using a favorite device, the heraldic image, which contrasts the mythological figures of animals in their fixed dimension "forever

labouring on a shield" with the relative impermanence of human generations, the poet exhibits pointedly the character of the perpetual quest for the meaning of time. The horses move slowly and steadily across a "boundless plain" that marks the direction of world history, but the riders themselves fall and are succeeded by others. Though there seems always to be progress, the imaginations of the horsemen leap so far in expectation and desire that any gain appears as nothing; and, at each instant, the disheartening prospect of a final failure is present:

> Our horses move on such a ground, for them
> Perhaps the progress is all ease and pleasure,
> But it is heavy work for us, the riders,
> Whose hearts have flown so far ahead they are lost
> Long past all finding
> While we sit staring at the same horizon.
> Time has such curious stretches, we are told,
> And generation after generation
> May travel them, sad stationary journey,
> Of what device, what meaning?

New riders will fill these saddles and watch a further unfolding of the future dream, but we must imagine them victims of similar pangs as they strain in spirit to a horizon they cannot hope to meet. Only the horses that have emerged from the very seed of earth at its inception and "have borne upon their saddles/Forms fiercer than the tiger" continue the endless march. Though man has been told of his *immortality* and the *mortality* of the animal kingdom and the world as he now knows it, he is still beguiled by the quest, tempted by elusive treasures within the bounds of time:

> Yet these worn saddles
> Have powers to charm us to obliviousness.
> They were appointed for us, and the scent of the ancient
> leather
> Is strong as a spell. So we must mourn or rejoice
> For this our station, our inheritance
> As if it were all. This plain all. This journey all.

Whatever promises have been made him, Muir insists on man's dedication to the earth, which appears in this passage of an early poem as a somewhat enigmatic tie but, as his work progresses, changes into a sacramental relationship. Only through the dust and clay of which flesh is composed can the restless fire of the spirit act for its ends.

Subsequent sections of the poem exemplify the search for a stable kingdom in which man can dwell and for a balance of conflicts within the individual. Moses is shown, wandering with his tribe, but they defect from God's will through fear and idolatry. When the tables of the law are shattered, man is condemned to travel, pierced by the loss and by nostalgia for a habitation. Muir renders this itinerant state with the accompanying desire that compels man to ceaseless exploration and the feeling of frustration lying beneath it:

> We have passed great kingdoms by
> In a separate dream.
> Have seen tame birds wheel homing through the sky,
> And towers caught in a distant gleam,
> And smelt the searching scent of roots, the moist and
> dry. . . .

The following part turns its focus from the tribe to the individual, who finds himself composed of conflicting elements of "Indifference" and "Pity," but understands, ironically enough, that the latter becomes deadly without the former to hold it in check. If love won out, we are told, it would usher in its opposite—not hate but indifference—for it is only the disparities in our existence which urge us to harmony. The life we make is pieced out of fragments: the broken tablets of a covenant; the legendary beasts on banner and shield through which we catch reflections of a distant country, a mythical land of the mind's desire.

> A fabulous wave far back in time
> Flung these calm trophies to this shore
> That looks out on a different sea
> These relics of a buried war. . . .

Muir's poetry constantly shifts between a preoccupation with journey and quest and a concern with stasis and place. These two contradictory kinds of being are characteristic of man's spirit and flesh, the one extending beyond the possibilities of the other. Muir's discovery of Kafka probably confirmed him in his comprehension of such ironic frictions in man, of his boundless capacity for imagination and his limited capacity for action. We have only to think of K., whose infinite travail gets him no closer to the castle. What K. doesn't know and Muir learns before our eyes in his poetry is that the castle is just next door and requires an alteration *within* us for entrance: a movement costly to make because our own weight is terrible to lift.

Roads and mountains often serve Muir, as they do Kafka in *The Castle,* both as symbols of frustrating obstacles and as the means by which man can attain the prize he covets but recognizes dimly. In "The Stationary Journey," "The Mountains," and "The Road," the track he has worn in his travels coils backward into time, while the rich promise of his dreams, he knows, may contain only a bleak reality and finally escape fulfillment. This creates a burden of indecision in "The Mountains" that crushes him, until his sole wish is to "leap time's bound or turn and hide/From time in my ancestral wood." But this is likewise a "double delusion," and man is left to entertain his dreams, plagued by the chance that they are no more than that. However, the repetition of these dreams lends the searcher assurance, for they goad and tease him from lethargic despair. The body of Muir's poetry so abounds in such images, events, and experiences that we are made acutely aware of the forceful pattern they have imposed upon his thought. With the exception of mythological and religious figures chosen for the aspects of the human condition they reflect, the narrators of most of the poems are anonymous. By means of this device, the reader himself is drawn into the poem and shares in the struggle of which it is the scene. This struggle grows out of a feeling of deprivation, a hunger for stability in relation to the world and unity in relation to oneself. Because the poem invokes what is *absent*—if I may borrow an idea from Mallarmé—it brings together a present state and a desired one, attempting the transference of the first into the second. Muir uses the mountain and the paths that wind around its sides in "The Unfamiliar Place" to mirror this as an inward condition. The mountain, constructed by layer upon layer of time, keeps locked within it the original kingdom of man. Occasionally, this place may be grasped as a hidden presence exerting itself upon the imagination, but life continues on the outer slopes with its good and evil, love and death, in ignorance of what lies so near and is yet so remote:

> I do not know this place,
> Though here for long I have run
> My changing race
> In the moon and the sun,
> Within this wooded glade
> Far up the mountainside
> Where Christ and Caesar died
> And the first man was made.
> I have seen this turning light

For many a day.
I have not been away
Even in dreams of the night.
In the unnumbered names
My fathers gave these things
I seek a kingdom lost,
Sleeping with folded wings.

The barriers that prevent man's return are everywhere to be found in these poems, intractable bulwarks of the world of appearances. Walls, gates, steep cliffs, and mazes act as metaphors for the cleavage between a changing, pluralistic universe and the unalterable nature which exists, like a precious stone, at its core.

Just as the creation maintains this split, enduring a sleep of time which, as Kathleen Raine says, is illusory, man's own nature is divided from itself. We recall Muir's figure before the looking glass. What he sees is the work of the temporal order, which conceals the whole person. In a poem called "The Human Fold," the human countenance is again considered and an analogy drawn to the larger separation of earth from Eden, God from his creatures. Though each face looks uniform and dull, the poet catches a glimmer of recesses that contradict any superficial disguise:

Yet looking at each countenance
I read this burden in them all:
'I lean my cheek from eternity
For time to slap, for time to slap.
I gather my bones from the bottomless clay
To lay my head in the light's lap.'

Even past childhood the awareness of an integral self free from the hands of time is available to us, perhaps in the most ordinary situations. Yet our fate is bound up with the stuff of earth from which our flesh was fashioned. To deny this is to reject the only substantial basis we have; otherwise, as is said elsewhere, we should relinquish

Our kingdom's crown,
And to great Nothing toss
Our last left jewel down . . .

In the mirror, all we read is backwards, "the reverse side," but this is sufficient matter from which to glean a partial image of the truth we demand. The difficulty consists in our efforts to seize it; reaching out, we are once more confronted with the bothersome obstacle of our own reflection. Time's hold on us prevents our leap through

the mirror and beyond the surface of things. Muir's poetry records thought and imagination as they move toward that point of departure where art will disappear in the realized unity of life.

III

While time prevails and holds all existence in sway, man is urged to restless movement by the sense of brevity and change resulting from the temporal flux. Between man and this impersonal condition binding him there is waged a desperate combat. As presented by Muir in many poems, he does not merely bear witness to some lost golden age but is an active traveler searching it out. Consistent with this is the image of the road or way, which appears with the same regularity and prominence as the poet's other common but evocative symbols. The added advantage of the image is that it carries the weight of almost universal religious application, as well as adhering to Muir's plan of quest and change. This heightens the contrast of the imperfection of human affairs with the stillness of the land outside of time awaiting man's return.

The choice lies with man whether he will submit passively to the lure of "the great non-stop heraldic show" and bow to the abyss of pure history (the accumulation of events *in* time) or turn circumstances to his account by gathering up from his forced journey whatever clues may lead him to an elevated perspective of the whole. Though Muir, in "The Recurrence," momentarily holds Nietzsche's idea that everything repeats itself periodically, he rejects it because such narrow scope renders the greatest acts of earth—he cites Christ's crucifixion—hollow with deceit. But in another poem, "The Way," he emphasizes the pressure of both time and pilgrimage on the individual. Constructed in the form of a dialogue between the inner and outer man, or, perhaps, between man and an angel of the roads, it summarizes explicitly the terror and force of movement as a condition fundamental to life. I quote it in full.

> Friend, I have lost the way.
> *The way leads on.*
> Is there another way?
> *The way is one.*
> I must retrace the track.
> *It's lost and gone.*
> Back, I must travel back!
> *None goes there, none.*
> Then I'll make here my place,
> *(The road runs on),*

Stand still and set my face,
(The road leaps on),
Stay here, forever stay.
None stays here, none.
I cannot find the way.
The way leads on.
Oh places I have passed!
That journey's done.
And what will come at last?
The road leads on.

There is, then, no rest; the forms of life to which man is consistently subjected are those of an essential mobility. Even if it were possible to halt, out of weariness or despair, the result would be undesirable: a refusal of redemptory labors. Furthermore, a dignity crowns man's acceptance of this melancholy travel, as Muir indicates in "Adam's Dream," where our earthly forefather watches in his sleep after the Fall a spectacle of the chaotic world to come, and wakens sadly to the new allotment of man. Yet he realizes that the journey back to the estate he has sacrificed cannot be borne or won without love. From the gestures of our affection and sympathy, as much as from those of our pursuit of an exalted destiny, we will achieve what stature we finally have.

The passage along the road often enough takes on the guise of hallucination or nightmare, as it does in "The Grove" and "The Voyage." In the first of these poems, Muir again employs the image of questing horsemen. Here they are trying to find the trail leading to the top of the "towering hill," the elusive mountain we have already noted. Though they glimpse the peak ahead, the riders are forced to traverse "the smothering grove" in order to keep to the path they assume to be correct. As soon as they enter these precincts, their perception is altered by the half-light, and from the shadows emerge the relics of a bestial past that wraps around their spirits and senses:

Adulterous shapes of animal hate and love,
The idol-crowded nightmare Space,
Wood beyond wood, tree behind tree,
And every tree an empty face
Gashed by the casual lightning mark
The first great Luciferian animal
Scored on clay and leaf and bark.

It would seem as if the flood gates of history had suddenly been opened and the whole course of man's passage throughout time released in images before the horsemen. They are faced with the

most potent spectres dark behavior can muster against the soul's tireless demands for light. In a sense, time comes to a standstill and arrays its deadliest powers in the manner of concrete scenes laid out in space. The scent of the animal hangs thickly upon the grove and casts a spell of fear and dismay over the spectators. But the subtlest and most insidious picture is that offered by the parade of "progress," in which the transition from the sheer animal to the animal-in-man is visible:

> Proud animal dreams uplifted high,
> Booted and saddled on the animal's back
> And staring with the arrogant animal's eye:
> The golden dukes, the silver earls, and gleaming black
> The curvetting knights sitting their curvetting steeds,
> The sweet silk-tunicked eunuchs singing ditties,
> Swaying like wandering weeds,
> The scarlet cardinals,
> And lions high in the air on the banner's field,
> Crowns, sceptres, spears and stars and moons of blood,
> And sylvan wars in bronze within the shield . . .

These figures of dionysian character rise up before the mind from unknown corners; their spell is all the stronger because they present to the riders distorted reflections of themselves—mocking parodies of human aspiration. The motives of the travelers are countered by a revelation of bestiality that indicates the insuperable odds they must overcome to attain their chosen destination. But the spell passes as quickly as it came, and the riders are released from its grip. The trance has accomplished its purpose, however, for they waken to the reality of their dual nature, which disposes of the quest as an impossible fancy:

> How could it be? There was the stifling grove,
> Yet here was light; what wonder led us to it?
> How could the blind road go
> To climb the crag and top the towering hill,
> And all that splendor spread? We know
> There was no road except the smothering grove.

The possibility of transcending that part of themselves which populates the grove is defeated by the knowledge that it is inextricably connected to whatever else the riders are. There would seem to be, then, an ironic reversal to the entire direction of the poem, fixing hope as a false principle. Yet Muir's attitude is not so black as this. The meaning for man implicit in the poem's conclusion insists upon cognizance of a

fallen nature, which—as in "Variations on a Time Theme"—precludes any easy solution to the confinement it imposes. Once the original unity of existence has been violated, man becomes the site of warring contrarities and cannot resolve them at will. Time, the medium in which he is immersed, gathers the deeds and events of the past until, in the shape of history, they create a nearly intolerable burden for him to carry. It is the same realization which causes Stephen Dedalus in *Ulysses* (and we may pretty well assume that Joyce speaks for himself here) to cry out that history is the nightmare from whose bondage he seeks escape. For Muir, the abandoned harmony of the creation retains its self-enclosed status as "the grassy ring/Where all our gathered treasures lay in sleep." The absence which the poem fills by imagination and desire reveals an image of that world in a sudden flare. Yet we are doomed to be caught up in this brilliance and then dropped back to our old disorder; for the poem is confined to the brief revelation of what existence should be, yet alone cannot bring that condition about.

Moving further into the realm of legend and myth, "The Voyage" belongs to that tradition of poems which includes "The Ancient Mariner," "Bateau Ivre," and "The Ballad of the Long-Legged Bait." Muir's work, like the others and Baudelaire's "Le Voyage" as well, involves a journey depending upon the reach of imagination rather than measurable distances. The anonymous "we" who narrate the occurrences register the most profound changes in their communal state of mind due to an estrangement from the familiar world. The road we have seen so frequently before is altered now in substance from earth to water, and the setting is reduced to a few fundamental elements. But the voyage itself remains another parable of the human quest.

Setting out, the mariners arrive at a point where land at first impresses them as strangely remote, then altogether lost. The monotonous appearance of the sea lends itself to their feeling of vast and timeless spaces where "the Unchanging grew." As the ship travels farther, the sailors' sense of alienation from the rest of humanity and from civilization increases proportionately. As they are driven deeper into themselves, the only image of which they are aware in these desolate ocean wastes is their own. Even the shape of things seen falls gradually away, as the eye, influenced by imagination, searches the horizon:

> Sometimes in utter wonder lost
> That loneliness like this could be
> We stood and stared until almost
> We saw no longer sky or sea,

But only the frame of time and space,
An empty floor, a vacant wall,
And on that blank no line to trace
Movement, if we moved at all.

The voyagers' perceptions from here on grow towards the visionary or hallucinatory, however you like to put it. Imagining themselves at last alone in the universe, they begin to transform it by their own thought. In this solipsistic act, the land left so behind returns in scenes of a wealth and potentiality beyond any former experience of it. Though we are never explicitly told so, we must conclude that these visions reflect the magnificence and splendor preceding the Fall. Once the mind is freed of all its distractions, it turns back to those images like ghosts of the past—a past always present—rising to meet it. Again, as in poems previously considered, the secret promise of the creation discloses itself to man only in dreams, hallucinations, or similar phenomena.

Language among the travelers is restored to that function the poet knows as the essence of his craft: the ability to recreate things in their absolute qualities by naming them anew. The disappearance of a physical landscape within which images could be judged allows an infinite expansion of the possibilities latent in the human mind for visualizing forms of perfection:

And blessing, we ourselves were blest,
Lauded the loss that brought our gain,
Sang the tumultuous world to rest,
And wishless called it back again.

For loss was then our only joy,
Privation of all, fulfilled desire,
The world our treasure and our toy
In destitution clean as fire.

Our days were then—I cannot tell
How we were then fulfilled and crowned
With life as in a parable,
And sweetly as gods together bound.

The kinship of the images of earth the mariners cherish with the ones Muir links to the primal state is obvious. Man's freedom to dream, to create through the imagination, always compels him to fill the void at the center of his own being, which is also the abandoned center of the creation. As he recasts the mold of earth within his mind, he is

himself temporarily restored to his original place. "The Voyage," then, turns on the same theme as "The Grove" but approaches it from the opposite side. Where the earlier work emphasizes the divided halves of man's nature that hinder the attainment of his goal, the present poem shows the knowledge of that goal he commands when no longer caught up with preoccupations of society and history. The voyage, however, ends as we should expect: land is discovered, and the mariners feel sharply the discrepancy between their visions and the actual situation now before them:

> And it rose up, a sullen stain
> Flawing the crystal firmament.
> A wound! We felt the familiar pain
> And knew the place to which we were sent.

If the conclusion holds the same frustration and futility apparent in Muir's other treatments of the quest, it is simply because the pattern of hope and dream is an indestructible, in fact, indispensable, part of human consciousness. Without these fond images, man would succumb to the brutal mechanics of pure time. The distinctive experience of the voyage opens once more to its participants a world in which they can attempt the realization of their dream. As we have said before, the earth is, for the poet, a legacy not to be relinquished:

> The dream and the truth we clutched as ours
> And gladly, blindly stepped on earth.

Identical or similar visions contribute to a number of Muir's poems dealing with the passage along the way or road. Theseus, in "The Labyrinth," after slaying the minotaur, finds himself again in the world, only to discover he has not escaped the maze. The world is a more complex and inscrutable puzzle, the core of which eludes him. But he is granted a revelation of the "eternal dialogue" of the gods and sees that "our life/Was as a chord deep in that dialogue." The intuition of Theseus is an instantaneous one, like the sudden visitation of a spirit announcing the future that lies at the terminus of the road and is yet beside us as we run our course. Harassed by time and enforced movement, Muir's travelers press forward against the wall of a future composed in stillness and silence, a future whose emptiness awaits their presence to fill it. The only way to reach this point is through time, though direction is uncertain and the end rarely visible. Yet these travelers burn with fierce impatience for a final condition which cannot be effaced. Abandoned to the path of a world on which

time and death hunt them down, they are carried ahead by the possibility of freedom, in the hope that, beyond the dark winds of destiny blowing against them, stands the country whose bright image sears their minds.

IV

It is Edwin Muir's great virtue as a poet to have thrown into relief those aspects of our experience that hide unnoticed just the other side of consciousness; to have exposed our lives as patterns and roles beyond the trivial particularities in which we become entangled. In entering nearly impenetrable regions to bring to us a vision of what we are and what we do, he most resembles the dedicated figure of Orpheus. Like that legendary singer, he seeks to rescue the treasure, with love and understanding—Eurydice drawn up from the timeless circle of death and exile. But here, as always, even the poet's gifts fail. What we see through his eyes is the forever fading image of the beloved at the entrance to the cave, half caught in the gleam of the daylight world, beckoning us with her gesture and regard that contain the secrets we would know but now can merely guess. What resounds in the core of Orpheus' being at the moment of that fateful gaze provides the source from which he will fashion his art. As long as he remains in the world his knowledge is incomplete; only in dreams and visions, as Muir indicates in his poem on the mythical singer, can those lovers sweep forward together to an earth they fulfill.

In his most recent book of poetry, *One Foot in Eden* (1956), Muir comes closest to a realization of the unity symbolized by the reconciliation of Orpheus and Eurydice. Leaving behind the realm of travels and voyages, he turns directly to primary sources of religious belief and ethical pattern: Greek myth, the Old Testament, and the suffering and passion of Christ. The complications of human existence, considered so often in previous poems, are pared away to expose the condition for which man searches. This condition, Muir insists—as does Eliot in *Four Quartets*—is one of utter simplicity, if only it were known; and its presence, so near at hand, creates in these poems a wisdom and serenity surpassing that of all his other work. Time begins to recede into the background, and eternity shimmers and hovers about the landscape and figures. Towards the end of his *Collected Poems,* Muir already envisages, in "The Transfiguration," the disappearance of the partial and changing in the calm silence of an earth made whole. Though this vision must pass, as we have repeatedly seen, it has ac-

quired a prophetic strain which holds it in the mind. At the conclusion, the poem unfolds the Christian promise of a second coming and the undoing of all that has been done since Adam and Eve were cast from paradise:

> In our own time,
> Some say, or at a time when time is ripe.
> Then he will come, Christ the uncrucified,
> Christ the discrucified, his death undone,
> His agony unmade, his cross dismantled—
> Glad to be so — and the tormented wood
> Will cure its hurt and grow into a tree
> In a green springing corner of young Eden . . .

Muir's commitment to earth, not as the self-perpetuating ring of history but as the essential context of human life—that for which we were made—is enlarged here, until it includes a spiritual reality alive in every situation. He recounts, in *An Autobiography,* a visit to Rome following the last war during which he was struck by what he calls "the evidence of another Incarnation that met one everywhere and gradually exerted its influence." At the same time, he arrived at an understanding of his own Christian beliefs. These begin with the Incarnation and end in the Resurrection. Around them, he has built the framework of many of his latest poems.

Between these two sacred events lies the imperfect existence of man; and Muir, in two poems which preface sections of *One Foot in Eden*—dedicated to Milton and Kafka respectively—indicates by the example of these writers the pursuit of redemption in defiance of whatever elements work for our destruction and disintegration. In the first, Milton, blind and dying, suffers the hell to which his poetry has borne witness, but courage and endurance lead him on until his sight returns and he beholds "far and near the fields of paradise." The homage to Kafka praises that artist's ability to discern in human shame and guilt the possibility of grace. Turning then to the Old Testament, Muir handles with reverence and love the persons of Adam and Eve, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But it is in his treatment of the Creation particularly that the poet elaborates those themes we have followed through his work.

The scheme of "The Days" contains a description of the week of God's creative activity; adding lyrically piece by piece to the story of the world's construction, it retells the opening of *Genesis.* With man's arrival and his naming of all things, a relationship is settled between

him and his environment—one which cannot easily be broken off, though it may be changed.

> Then on the waters fell
> The shadow of man, and the earth and the heavens scrawled
> With names, as if each pebble and leaf would tell
> The tale untellable.

This instant, now separated from human life by the intervening Fall and the work of time, harbors the full reality of which man is so essential a part. What the mariners of "The Voyage" conjured in their isolation with the aid of memory here invests each object and being, and they stand forth in a dazzling completeness. These gifts of earth and life, as the poem implies, are man's freely to dispose—and thus are lost. Yet human defection leaves the components of the physical universe—as it does the animals—untainted. What the lonely women, kneeling in the "fragmentary day" at the end of the poem, pray for is a reunion with that fullness; the faces of time and death stripped away to reveal that other "day where all are gathered together,/Things and their names . . ."

The poems come back again and again to this situation, as if it were the only one. In "Outside Eden," the road followed through all the grief and labor of life leads to the very threshold of an ancient landscape, still residing in its primal majesty. Those who gain the view find the country inaccessible, as they do in Kafka's writings, and await a final release from exile, but this prospect magically keeps them there:

> A few lead in the harvest still
> By the ruined wall and broken gate.
> Far inland shines the radiant hill.
> Inviolable the empty gate,
> Impassable the gaping wall;
> And the mountain over all.

The mountain on whose treacherous slopes man struggles in a number of earlier poems is transfigured with light. Rising like a sacred offering of earth to the surrounding skies, it retains the qualities of permanence, solidity, and luminous perfection that constitute the goal of human desire. The inhabitants of the country outside the gates, through the purity of their intention, read in the limitations of their environment, in rocks and vegetation, a scripture of failure and renewal:

> The simple have long memories.
> Memory makes simple all that is.
> To these the lawless world can love

At ease, the thickets running wild,
The thorny waste, the flourishing grove.
Their knotted landscape wrong and clear
As the crude drawings of a child,
Is to them become more dear
Than geometrical symmetry.
Their griefs are all in memory grown
As natural as a weathered stone.

No question remains as to man's place in this landscape; his fate is totally bound up with it. Life, if it will prove itself, must take the path that winds through a country to which it is heir. At the end, the traveler returns where he began and rediscovers the meaning of his origins. All that his travels put on him are, paradoxically, discarded if he perseveres.

The necessity of this pattern of divestiture and regeneration is handled on a broader and more apocalyptic scale in "The Horses," which relates the tale of man after "the seven days' war that put the world to sleep." Left in a world of silence with all communications severed, the farmers and their families in the poem adjust themselves to a new and bewildering isolation. They find that the tractors and machines, remnants of a huge mechanical design that instigated the war, repel them and adopt ancient tools of cultivation, as well as the oldest modes of living. As if in response to this new humility and simplicity, the people are visited by herds of horses, whose appearance strikes them with the same reverence and awe we saw in one of Muir's first poems:

And then, that evening
Late in the summer the strange horses came.
We heard a distant tapping on the road,
A deepening drumming; it stopped, went on again
And at the corner changed to hollow thunder.
We saw the heads
Like a wild wave charging and were afraid.
We had sold our horses in our fathers' time
To buy new tractors. Now they were strange to us
As fabulous steeds set on an ancient shield
Or illustrations in a book of knights.
We did not dare go near them. Yet they waited,
Stubborn and shy, as if they had been sent
By an old command to find our whereabouts
And that long-lost archaic companionship.
In the first moment we had never a thought
That they were creatures to be owned and used.
Among them were some half-a-dozen colts

> Dropped in some wilderness of the broken world,
> Yet new as if they had come from their own Eden.
> Since then they have pulled our ploughs and borne our loads,
> But that free servitude still can pierce our hearts.
> Our life is changed; their coming our beginning.

The highly charged significance for life which these horses imply, and their natural opposition to the industrial and mechanical civilization that has heretofore prevented their coming, reminds us of D. H. Lawrence's brilliant moral tale, *St. Mawr,* which involves a symbolic horse of like value. But Muir's notion of a renewed contact with the earth differs from Lawrence's and grows out of a Biblical context of thought. This return to an ordered way of life is rendered more precious by contrast with the experience of the journey there. Knowledge of pain, time, effort, and death drops the scales from human sight, until man recognizes what he had always looked at and never seen. In that moment, yet to come—though continuously drawing near in Muir's recent poetry—each part of the creation springs back into its original relation to man. From one point of view, nothing physically tangible is introduced into the world at the edge of Eden. The horses were ever there, but trapped in the single, flat dimension of our perception. Only a combined act of grace and will, Muir would say, opens depths beyond this in which man and all other creatures stand together. Without this opening, every being and thing stays locked in its lonely cell formed of broken ties.

In such poems as "The Christmas," "The Son," "The Killing," and "The Lord" Muir writes meditations on the character and sacrifice of Christ. His treatment of this subject supports the view of a transmuted earth in other poems, for the awareness of Incarnation we have already remarked stems from the life and martyrdom of Jesus. However, there is no facile or empty religiosity in these pieces. The poet's lifelong dedication to man, to the creation, and to the overwhelming importance of a few problems has brought him to a religious conclusion. But for those who want merely to be made comfortable and secure, Muir affords no satisfactory answers; belief is constantly thwarted by disbelief and has always to renew itself. In "Antichrist" the diabolic "enchanter" illustrates the subtle parodies of truth that mislead the smug or unwary. Yet Christ's sacrifice remains an inescapable fact, asserting itself throughout history and altering the countenance of life whenever its importance for the world is understood. A death of this kind penetrates all subsequent generations to the roots:

Ordinary men
Saw him take his fall.
All is changed since then;
He is joined with all.

The identification of Christ with the common fate of men invests this fate with a reverential and sacred tone, which binds together every revelation, illumination, and visionary experience in Muir's poetry and justifies them. The "fable" of human life, this implies, can only receive purpose *within* time from something which transcends the temporal and speaks over the silence of dead generations. The earth endures as the setting for human actions but alone is insufficient. Timelessness intrudes upon it through imagination and the religious sense, luring the traveler towards the release he demands by instinct. This release is never fully accomplished, for that would, as an actual state, abolish poetry, which thrives on imperfection. But Muir's poems reach to the border of this transmutation and offer prophetic images of its effect.

The dilemma of Orpheus remains. For the song he sings is created from the suffering, hope, and tragic memory forced upon him by separation. He inclines himself towards the darkness of the underworld, which he cannot enter until death claims him, to catch the fleeting look of his lost Eurydice. What survives of this effort is the language of which Muir writes in "Day and Night," a language touching the innermost self:

The night, the night alone is old
And showed me only what I knew,
Knew, yet never had been told;
A speech that from the darkness grew
Too deep for daily tongues to say,
Archaic dialogue of a few
Upon the sixth or seventh day.

The mythological figures of Orpheus and Eurydice, then, come to symbolize man's imprisonment in time and the destiny of his ardent desires. Poetry—whether Shakespeare's *Tempest,* Pope's *Moral Essays,* or Pound's *Cantos*—belongs to a future perpetually sought, for it transforms what *is* into what *is not.* From the dim chaos of present experience, it makes available a vision based on what is most permanent in human aspirations. Muir's distinction is to have once more stated them and the labor they exact of us.

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